

Fool's Hope

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Fool's Hope

by [astolat](#)

Summary

There was very little hope to be found within the Darkmount cell. What there was, Optimus clung to, for as long as he could.

Notes

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There was very little hope to be found within the Darkmount cell. What there was, Optimus clung to, for as long as he could. The restraining collar remained uncomfortable. That meant he had been a prisoner for less than a week, because his sensory systems had not yet adapted to block out the unpleasant sensation. The passage of time was otherwise difficult to ascertain; the cycle of power surges from the force field on the cell door interfered with his internal system clocks, causing inconsistencies. His small ration of energon was being dispensed at random times, and the lights remained at the same dim setting. But at least he could be sure it had been less than a week.

Even so, however—he could not help recognizing that too much time had passed. When he had regained consciousness within the cell, he had braced himself to endure interrogation and torture. Neither had occurred. It was impossible to ignore the terrible implication: that the information he possessed was no longer of any importance.

He'd known Megatron was getting too much energon back to Shockwave. New Decepticon warriors had been popping up on Earth over the last few months, too many for them to counter. Only—he hadn't expected the end to come so quickly, so brutally, when at last it happened. Megatron must have brought even more warriors over in secret and saved them for the final push; the Autobots had been outnumbered three to one in that last fight, and by Decepticons operating at full power, not on quarter-rations like the rest of the war. He had seen Grimlock go down even as

his own optics went offline. The Aerialbots had already fallen. Prowl and Hound had never come back from their last scouting mission that morning.

It seemed increasingly possible that *all* the Autobots had been captured. That the war was simply over, and he was only waiting in here for whatever gruesome execution Megatron would enact to celebrate his victory.

Optimus tried to hold on to hope for some time longer. But all too soon, the last irritating twinge from the collar faded. Forced by his logic unit to accept the agonizing possibility as now a near-certainty, Optimus drew a ragged intake and reached to the Matrix for solace. Sorrow and resolve flowed back to him. Sometimes there was no other choice but to die with courage. He'd faced that choice before, and he would face it now. Whatever empire of horrors Megatron built would not endure forever. He had stood before it as long as he could, with all his might, and others would rise before it. He would take heart from that, even if the worst had come.

The clanging outside the cell seemed to come almost as an answer, as if to try his determination. One wall slid open, leaving the glitter of a force field mesh in the way; Thundercracker was on the other side. His mouth was downturned and grim. He sketched a small rectangle in the mesh, which opened, and tossed in a pair of restraining cuffs. "Put 'em on," he said.

"If I refuse?" Optimus said steadily.

"Then I fry you unconscious with the collar and come in and put them on for you, and you'll be drooling lubricant for the next hour," Thundercracker said. "That how you want to go out, it's up to you." He looked away, his jaw tight.

After a moment, Optimus reached down and picked up the cuffs. He put them around his wrists, and Thundercracker activated them; the cuffs slammed together as the maglink field activated, and then it pulled them in, pinning his crossed wrists to the front of his chest. Thundercracker lowered the field and stepped back, jerking his head to make Optimus step in front of him.

"I'm surprised Megatron picked you as an executioner," Optimus said to him. Thundercracker was one of the few Decepticons he'd ever known to display something resembling honor; he'd never displayed the gloating satisfaction over wounding an enemy that most of the others did.

Thundercracker only glared back with sullen resentment and said, "Get moving."

All the resolve in the world couldn't keep Optimus's heart from clenching in agony as he came blinking out of the guts of Darkmount onto the terrace that faced the wide expanse of Polyhex Square, and saw the long line of his fellow Autobots, chained together and pressed up against the wall with a triple row of Decepticons keeping them covered. Ironhide and Prowl and Ratchet, the Protectobots and the Aerialbots, Wheeljack standing with Grimlock and the other Dinobots, even Bumblebee—all of them, all his comrades and beloved friends.

Megatron was on the dais already in the middle of a speech, his voice rolling out in crashing waves of sound coming from all the massive speakers around the mechs cramming up against the front edge of the square, more of them than Optimus had seen in a long time, even if not remotely enough of them to fill the massive square.

"Darkmount's reactors live again, and soon so will many more," Megatron was declaring, and below, Deceptions were moving through the crowd, handing out small cubes of energon to desperate grasping hands. No wonder so many had come. It had been a long time since any of them had been able to afford to give energon away to neutrals. "Our world's long famine is not yet over, but the end is in sight, and none who are willing to lend their hands to the great work of rebuilding

that lies before us need fear starvation.”

That got him a massive cheer, and he smiled, coldly. “But you didn’t come here just for pretty speeches, or even energon. You wanted to know whether the rumors are true. Well, see for yourselves.” He turned towards the Autobots and gestured, and Thundercracker shoved Optimus forward to the edge of the terrace with a blazing spotlight turned on him, painfully bright after the long stay in the dim cell. “Optimus Prime has been taken prisoner, and with him his senior officers, his combiner teams, and his shock troops. The Autobot army is no more. *The Great War is over!*”

His voice climbed to a shout by the end, over the rising wave of muttering that rolled through the crowd. Optimus looked down at the mass of them. In front of the terrace, beneath the enormous ten-foot-thick Decepticon symbol mounted in the center of the railing, stood the Jaws of Polyhex, the terrible spiked grinding wheels that had chewed up so many Autobots into scrap for cheering crowds before this. Optimus had personally witnessed, to his horror, more than one such execution: Megatron had reserved it for spies and senior officers, and Optimus had always come if he could, despite the sickening horror of the spectacle; the crowds of neutrals that came offered enough cover at least to stay hidden, and each time he’d looked for some chance, some way to stage a rescue—but he’d only ever managed it twice, out of all the terrible times.

But—hope leapt in him—someone was ready to try *this* time, too. There was a big hunched mech in a smelter-worker’s shell standing near the Jaws, and it was *Ultra Magnus*, in an ideal position to leap up as soon as the first victim was pushed to the mouth. As soon as Optimus spotted him, he caught sight of another three or four mechs—that was Arcee over there in boxy fake armor, and he was reasonably sure that was Kup in the corner of the plaza, ready to take out the surveillance cameras—

“And many of you came here to witness the final period upon that war,” Megatron said, above. “To see the last of the Autobot resistance perish screaming in the Jaws of Polyhex, and to cheer their deaths—if for no other reason than sheer exhaustion,” he added, in a suddenly dry tone. Optimus frowned and glanced up at him. “But you will see only one thing perish today. Constructicons! Form Devastator, and proceed!”

Optimus looked grimly down, spotting Scrapper and the other Constructicons below even as they formed up into Devastator, his terrible height rearing up to the terrace railing. Optimus looked back at the other Autobots, trying to decide; if Megatron was only going to execute *him*, if he was going to send the others back into prison, where they could still possibly be rescued—he could send Magnus a signal, tell him to hold off—

But Devastator wasn’t reaching for him. Devastator reached up and tore the massive Decepticon symbol off the front of the railing—and with a roar, he smashed it down into the Jaws themselves, the teeth engaging in a howling shriek as they tore into the slab of titanium and durasteel. Devastator forced the symbol down into them, even as the mechanism started to jam and crack, the whole crowd pushing and shoving to get back—Ultra Magnus was being carried away with them—and as the last bit went in, the whole thing came apart and collapsed in a final high squealing and a burst of scattering fragments, sinking into a heap of scrap and slag.

Optimus stared down at it helplessly. Thundercracker was gawking open-mouthed next to him as if he was just as confused. And then Megatron roared out overhead, “I built the Decepticon Army—fought this war—for one purpose!” and they both jerked around to stare at him. “To destroy forever the corruption that had choked Cybertron, and sweep away the Primacy and the Senate. That goal is accomplished. And with the end of the war, comes the end of our division.” Megatron pointed to the slagged heap. “From this day forward, as there are no more Autobots—there are *no more Decepticons*. From now on, we are all once again *Cybertronians*.” He lowered his arm. “And

I'm not going to slag a hundred of *my people* if I don't have to."

Optimus tried to make any sense of it. Megatron couldn't mean to—what *did* he mean? It might have just been some kind of performance, but *why*—everyone on Cybertron knew he *would* scrap his enemies without hesitation; he wasn't going to erase eight million years of cruelty by not doing it, this one time—

"All former Autobots or Autobot sympathizers who voluntarily turn themselves in and surrender their weapons will receive full amnesty," Megatron said. "Even our prisoners of war will be paroled one by one, every three years, in ascending order of rank. The one exception will be Optimus Prime himself, who will be released only when he surrenders the Matrix and publicly renounces the title of Prime, and swears an oath of loyalty to the new order. Until then, he and all other prisoners will be held unharmed. For cruelty in peacetime is as misguided as mercy in war."

He looked over at Thundercracker, and waved his hand back at the base. "Take them back in."

Thundercracker—still staring dazedly up at him—jerked, then grabbed Optimus and dragged him away from the railing and back towards the door they'd come out of just before. Optimus had only a chance for one last look back at where Ultra Magnus was straightening up too tall, straining for a sight of him; then he was being led back into the base. Behind him he heard Megatron shouting, "But do not mistake me. This amnesty will last only until we parole our first prisoner. And from that date onward—I will take any attack upon Cybertronian soil as a fresh act of war. And I assure you that I will have *no* mercy—"

The rest was cut off by the door sliding shut on Optimus's heels. The other Autobots were being herded back to their cells some distance ahead of him; he could see glimpses of them down the hallway, but Thundercracker kept him well back, holding a gun right at his vulnerable midsection. But disorientation and confusion were more powerful restraints than weapons or cuffs or collar. Optimus almost felt *glad* when Thundercracker put him back into the cell and activated the field again. He sank down on the recharge slab, trying to make sense of the world.

"Take off the cuffs and slide them to the bottom of the door," Thundercracker said. The cuffs disengaged, and Optimus's hands fell into his lap with a clang, no longer held up by anything. He stared down at them and slowly detached the two cuffs. He got up and put them on the floor right next to the bottom of the door, then went and sat down again, limply. Thundercracker opened a small hole in the field and reached in and got the cuffs, and then just stood there gazing into the cell. Optimus had the distinct impression Thundercracker felt as bewildered as he did.

But there were heavy footsteps coming down the hall, familiar ones; Thundercracker turned and straightened into military posture. "Everything secure?" Megatron said, glancing in at Optimus.

"Yes, sir," Thundercracker said. He was staring up at Megatron.

"Good." Megatron looked down at Thundercracker. "Well, Thundercracker? It's taken a while. Longer than I thought it would, I confess," he added dryly. "But have I kept my promise?"

Thundercracker's eyes widened a little, still staring, and his voice actually distorted slightly, fuzzing with static as he said, "*Yes. Yes—my lord.*" And he bowed his head in a sudden deep jerk, and put his fist across his chest.

Megatron just nodded. "I'm putting you in charge of supervising the prisoners. Stay sharp: Ultra Magnus was out there today for certain; I imagine so were a few others." Thundercracker was nodding, quick; his optics had brightened. "And I also imagine some of our own will be inclined to look for some recreation. Soundwave is monitoring, but if you get there first, make clear they're

disobeying direct orders, and handle them accordingly. I don't want any mistakes down here."

He glanced at Optimus briefly once more, and then he stalked away down the corridor and passed out of sight. Thundercracker just stood there staring after him for a long time, even after Optimus couldn't hear footsteps any longer. There was something almost wondering in his face. Then he pulled himself out of it and reached for the door controls.

"Thundercracker," Optimus said. "What promise did Megatron make you?"

Thundercracker paused, looking in at him. After a moment, he said, "I was gonna quit after Vos."

"The bombardment of Vos," Optimus said. "That was—early in the war. The fiftieth vorn." He remembered. The high towers shattered, left smoking ruin; the streets filled with the charred corpses of the dead.

"Yeah," Thundercracker said. "And Megatron told me...he told me the war was going to be fragged up to the limit and there wasn't any way to get around it, and I'd be sick of it the whole time if I stuck it out. But he promised me that when the war was over...it wasn't going to *stay* fragged up any longer than it had to."

Then he slid the solid wall shut, and left Optimus closed inside staring at the featureless surface, equally blank.

#

Megatron came to the cell a few days later, with a grim-faced Ratchet in tow. Optimus stood up when the wall slid open, worried at first, but Ratchet seemed all right: in fact he was looking Optimus over just as anxiously. Megatron didn't bring down the force field, just gestured to Ratchet. "I want your medic, Optimus."

"You seem to have him, Megatron, much as I would wish otherwise," Optimus said, while Ratchet scowled.

"Virtually the entire surviving population are in pathetic shape," Megatron said. "Half the volunteers on our work details are coming apart at the seams in one session." He turned to Ratchet. "I want you to set up a clinic to repair them, next to the assignment station."

"Sure, be glad to help you out, fix up the mechs ready to climb on board with the great Decepticon cause," Ratchet said. "Is that a joke?"

Megatron turned back to Optimus. "If he does it, I'll let him come and visit you once a week."

Optimus drew a sharp breath as Ratchet stiffened. Soundwave would be listening in to every single word they said in here, of course, but Optimus and Ratchet had been fighting side by side for eight million years. They could say a great deal to one another *without* a single word. It was a painfully tempting offer—and all the more so because as soon as Ratchet set up shop and put himself out there, one of Magnus's people would take the amnesty and be able to go *see* him, openly, and they'd have a pipeline to the resistance on the outside. Assuming that the amnesty itself wasn't a trick intended to lure them into doing just that. But Magnus would be careful. He and his team moved locations on a regular basis anyway; they'd set up camp somewhere the operative wouldn't even know about, and only maintain a single rendezvous point.

"Ratchet?" Optimus said quietly. He was still trying to decide, but he certainly wasn't going to *order* Ratchet to put his skills to use under these circumstances.

Ratchet had his whole jaw clamped into a straight angry line, but he said shortly, “Your call, Optimus. Primus knows I can’t really blame a bunch of starving neutrals for taking Megatron’s deal. But I won’t buff out so much as a scratch on one of your soldiers,” he added to Megatron, raising his chin in defiance.

Megatron just looked at Optimus. “Well?”

“Agreed,” Optimus said, reluctantly. Megatron nodded and began to turn away, but he paused and glanced back when Optimus abruptly said his name. “Megatron—tell me something. Why are you doing this? The amnesty, showing mercy—do you expect us to believe you mean it now, all of a sudden? What was it all for, if you *didn’t* want to kill us?”

“What I wanted to kill was *that*,” Megatron pointed right at him, and Optimus looked down at the Autobot symbol on his own chest. “And the tomb doors are closing in on it. Letting you out isn’t going to save it—it’ll do the opposite. Soon it will be nothing more than a symbol of irrelevance, of mechs clinging to something pointless and stupid, after its time. And that’s more than worth sparing your lives.”

#

“Arcee came in three days ago,” Ratchet said, while he worked. He had ordered Optimus to lie down so he could check over his systems and make sure the restraining collar wasn’t causing any damage. It also meant that he could upload small data packets directly into Optimus’s storage on the shielded internal lines that not even Soundwave could snoop on. “Took that amnesty.”

“Is she all right?” Optimus said.

“About as well as you’d expect,” Ratchet said. “She didn’t want to talk much about it, but I could see she’d been living pretty rough lately. I patched up a couple sore spots, got her some energon. She asked how you were holding up. She was pretty worried the Decepticons had done something to you, the rest of us. Told her we were all right, just locked up tight down here.”

What he meant was that Ultra Magnus and his people were being squeezed, having a hard time getting supplies, and they didn’t have eyes on the prison levels. Not a good sign for a prospective break out. The little bit of data Ratchet uploaded, two numbers, was Magnus’s tally of the active and the wounded or disabled. The second number was unpleasantly large.

Optimus said quietly, “I hope you encouraged her not to feel guilty. There may be many former Autobots without better options. I would rather they had a chance for care.” He meant that he wanted Magnus to send in the rest of his seriously wounded to take the amnesty and get repaired.

“I tried,” Ratchet said, meaning he’d already suggested the idea to Arcee. “I’ll try to get it to sink in the next time I see her. She needs to come back in a couple of days for a tune up of the work I already did.”

It was not heartening, and the reports didn’t grow more so over the next three weeks. Magnus did send a couple more of his people in for the amnesty, but no more, which meant he couldn’t get them safely out without compromising his position. The Decepticon net was closing in. Optimus kept waiting with his entire system on edge for Ratchet to come in and tell him outright that their base had been discovered.

But it wasn’t Ratchet who came. Four days after Ratchet’s last visit, the door slid open unexpectedly and Megatron himself was on the other side, with Arcee in tow. She looked so miserable that Optimus didn’t even need to be told. But Megatron dropped the field and gestured

her in. "You have half an hour," he told her, then closed the field behind her and strode away.

Optimus stood and put his arms around her when she stumbled forward to bow her head against his chest. "It's all right," he said softly.

"It's not," she said, her voice distorted with sorrow. "It's not, Optimus."

"Tell me," he said steadily.

They sat together on the recharge slab and she told him, softly. "Megatron came to Ratchet's clinic when I was there and told us he had the base surrounded. He asked me to go in and take terms of surrender. Quarter for everyone, with parole starting in three years like the rest of you, for everyone except Magnus. Magnus has to swear loyalty to get out."

"He let you go in and warn them?" Optimus said.

She looked up at him miserably. "He had warriors five deep around every exit. Even the emergency back door. And a full scanning cordon for a mile in every direction. He showed me on the way."

"Magnus took the terms," Optimus said. It wasn't a question.

She took a deep breath. "Well. Kup said to make a counter offer." She managed a struggling smile, and Optimus forced a chuckle; he could just see the sour old bot telling the others to at least get a better deal. "One of us paroled every year, and regular visitation rights with Magnus. And the right to tell you what had happened."

Optimus bowed his head. "And Megatron accepted?"

Arcee nodded. "The first release not for three years, but after that..." She looked down. "He let me watch them surrender and get brought in. They all got put into stasis cuffs and taken to cells, but he didn't let them get bashed around."

They fell into silence, the silence of misery and relief mingled. Optimus couldn't help but be glad. His friends, his people were alive. They would be set free, one after another, and not even long from now. He didn't even need to fear, anymore, that it was a lie; the entire scheme increasingly made cold, pragmatic sense. If Megatron had staged some massive brutal execution, if he'd slaughtered Ultra Magnus's soldiers, he'd have made them all into martyrs for the Autobot cause. The savagery would have repelled the best of the neutrals, the ones whose help he was going to need to build his empire. Even some of his own, like Thundercracker.

Instead, for the price of a little painless mercy, Megatron was going to *get* those mechs. They would come out of desperation, for the energon and the repairs—but they'd stay afterwards because they wouldn't have to feel guilty for it. And in three years, when Beachcomber was the first of them to be let out, he was going to find a world at peace, full of mechs busy putting up buildings, none of whom wanted to go back to the days of war. By the time Ironhide and Prowl got out, half the Autobots would be *among* those mechs. They *wanted* that world; Optimus wanted it himself. It would become grotesquely easy to look away while Megatron built on the foundations they laid, even while on Earth, or any of a thousand other worlds, Decepticon warriors were unleashed in all their savagery to slaughter with impunity and send back resources they would use.

And yet Optimus couldn't truly be sorry that his people were alive. Even if he should have been; even if he would have chosen to die before watching Megatron win. Which, he recognized, was the terrible brilliance of Megatron's strategy: using their love for each other like a weapon against their

cause.

The door slid open again; Megatron and Thundercracker were on the other side, waiting. Optimus stood and clasped Arcee's shoulders in a silent farewell before he let her go. She looked back at him one last time as Thundercracker led her away down the hall. Megatron watched them go, then looked back at Optimus, his cold red eyes gleaming in the dark, a terrible thoughtfulness churning behind them.

Optimus faced him bleakly. "Do you expect me to thank you?"

"Hardly," Megatron said. "No, I'm wondering if a week or two would soften you up any further, or if you're ready for it now."

The words slid ominous like a vise around Optimus's spark chamber. He breathed out. "A week or a year or a hundred, it won't make any difference. I know what you're doing, Megatron. It's not as though I can't see it."

"That puts you up on virtually everyone else around me," Megatron muttered, half under his breath. "All right. I want you to take the deal yourself."

"And in exchange?"

"I'll offer the humans a peace treaty," Megatron said.

Optimus sat down hard and buried his face in his hands. He'd been braced against hearing it, whatever offer Megatron thought was going to be worth the price—kneeling at his feet, swearing loyalty; taking the Matrix out of his own chest and handing it over to be smashed in a final act of ruthless destruction. But he couldn't have braced hard enough for this. He almost didn't believe Megatron had said it. He'd *won*. There was no one who could stand in his way, and a planet full of resources for the plundering. That he'd give it up in exchange for a *symbolic* surrender was so unimaginable Optimus couldn't even have risked hoping for it. Optimus's voice crackled as he spoke. "What terms?"

Megatron snorted. "Do you think I'm trying to waste both our slugging time? No more killing humans and no more taking energon from Earth. I'll take the gas giant instead. They haven't got any use for it."

That made it—horribly—*believable*. Extracting energy from Jupiter would take longer than stripping Earth dry, but after all, Megatron had already gotten the main Decepticon reactors going. He could *afford* to spare humanity now.

"You'll surrender all Decepticon bases to them," Optimus said, half desperate. "And the Ark as well."

Megatron shrugged. "If that's a deciding point, fine. Do you really think I wouldn't be able to establish a new base anytime I chose?"

"An excellent point," Optimus said flatly.

"Which is why I'll make you Earth liaison," Megatron said. He raised an eyebrow when Optimus stared at him. "You *do* remember the bit about swearing loyalty, Optimus? Or did your audio pickup get distracted?"

"You want to give me a post in your government?" Optimus said blankly.

“I’m certainly not going to let you wander off somewhere without supervision,” Megatron said. “Don’t delude yourself about the importance of your role. I’m about as interested in liaising with humans as with Zarkanian blowflies. But you’ll have a direct communication line with Earth, so if Decepticons start systematically raiding the planet, you’ll *find out*, at which point I can safely assume you’ll decide your oath of loyalty means nothing and sail off to engage in the heroic last stand that I’m going to all these lengths to deny you.”

Optimus did see what Megatron was doing, he understood it with sharp perfect clarity. *That’s what I want to kill*, Megatron had said, pointing at the Autobot symbol, a symbol of peace and justice and freedom, and with this, he’d make Optimus be the one to destroy it himself, as publicly and explicitly as Megatron dumping the Decepticon symbol straight into the Jaws of Polyhex. He would make Optimus accept the end of the war and Decepticon rule, and demonstrate by example that it was acceptable to live under that rule. To *support* that rule with his own hands.

It was unthinkable. He couldn’t agree. Except for one terrible, grotesque fact: *he* had brought the war to Earth. He had given the order to launch the Ark at a distant unsuspecting world, teeming with innocent living beings, for the benefit of his cause and his people. The Autobots had not come as deliberate, callous invaders, but they had come as uninvited guests, ready to help themselves to what had never been theirs, operating under the too-convenient assumption that there was no one who wanted it, that there *would be* no one who wanted it. And when they had awoken from their long stasis and found a planet full of sentient beings just building a civilization around them, it had been too late to correct the error. Because they had brought the callous invaders with them.

And the humans—the humans had taken them in anyway. The humans had opened the doors of their home and fed them and welcomed them, and instead of upbraiding them, had been *grateful* to them for their help. The humans had even done their best to fight by their side. They had offered friendship and alliance, and the comfort of their generosity and courage.

That was what Megatron had to put into the balance. The lives and hopes and dreams of all humanity, the safety of that kind blue world. And on the other side was everything Optimus understood of honor and justice—and the last and greatest relic of his people, the final remnant of their ancient civilization, crushed first by the Quintesson invaders and then by Megatron himself. Optimus couldn’t help but reach to it inside his own mind, touch its glowing warmth: the gift he had been trusted with, to safeguard and defend.

But not at such a price. It did not weigh enough to tip the scales when Earth was on the other side. “Very well,” Optimus whispered, brokenly, and curled back down into the comforting darkness of his empty hands.

#

There was a new banner hanging overhead at the plaza when Optimus knelt at Megatron’s feet. It bore a single stylized symbol of Cybertron at the center of spiraling arms, a symbol that spoke of expansion and conquest. The banner didn’t require an electromagnetic field to keep it unfurled: Cybertron was in orbit around Jupiter now, and already a faint atmosphere had gathered over their world, borrowed from escaping wisps of gas. There was a light wind blowing. The Sun shone in the distance, a brilliant jewel the size of an optic. Earth was a single small blue dot.

Optimus had glimpsed Carly and Spike standing on the side with bleak, miserable faces, among a handful of other humans in formal garb all gathered beneath a small atmosphere-generator shield. As part of the treaty, Earth had demanded and gotten the right to send observers to make sure that the Autobot prisoners weren’t being tortured. Megatron either hadn’t cared enough to refuse, or had wanted them to see this: the Matrix, held out on Optimus’s hands, the offering that had bought

their lives. Or perhaps he'd thought that Optimus wouldn't go through with it unless he had a palpable reminder in front of him of the bargain he was making. If so, Megatron might not have been wrong. Optimus's hands shook with uncontrollable tremors as he took the Matrix from his chest, and he had to manually force an override to get the clamps to open.

The other Autobots had been dragged out to watch as well, their faces stricken. They all knew the bargain that had been made; Megatron had let Optimus tell them himself. One at a time, going into each separate cell to have the same agonizing conversation, to crush all the same objections, like crushing his own fuel pump into scrap over and over. It had been—good practice for this moment. He lifted the Matrix gently, and bowed his head so he didn't have to watch Megatron take it, and the roar of a thousand Decepticon voices cheering Megatron's name as he turned and held it overhead to display in triumph.

"I hereby renounce the title of Prime, and all claims to authority derived directly from our creator," he said, repeating the words mechanically, parroted from the script Soundwave was sending him line by line. "As my final act as Supreme Commander of Autobot forces, I order those forces to lay down their arms and disband. Having done so, I hereby renounce that title as well, and swear my full allegiance to Lord Megatron and the Empire of Cybertron, without reservation, so long as I continue to function. And I urge all individual Autobots and our sympathizers to accept the amnesty offered to them by the Empire, as I myself have done."

It wasn't even a little comforting to see Starscream's bitter, angry scowling afterwards, when Optimus numbly followed him and Soundwave back inside Darkmount: not down into the prison corridors, but into the vast central hall. The doors clanging shut behind him were a death-knell.

Starscream instantly wheeled and gestured at him and spat at Megatron, "Now tell me that this has all been a hideous, pathetic *joke*, and I get to reduce him to slag *right now!*"

His glare was savage, but Optimus only stared back at him in blankness. Megatron paused and turned around. The Matrix was dangling from his finger like an unimportant trinket. "Get hold of yourself."

"Get hold of *myself?*" Starscream shrieked. "You just pardoned *Optimus Prime!* The one mech who's kept this war going all these millions of years, and you're just letting him *go*? Oh, but no, I've forgotten—you're *making him a Decepticon officer!*"

"A Cybertronian officer."

"That's the same thing now! That's the point! That was the point of the whole war!"

"Starscream, you wouldn't recognize the point if you were stabbed with it," Megatron said, irritably. "Forget about Optimus. He's not your concern. Getting the turbines on Jupiter up and running is your concern."

"He *is* my concern when he's going to escape ten minutes from now, by *walking out the front door*, and start attacking us again!"

"Him and what army, the one locked inside Darkmount?" Megatron said. "With two thousand Decepticon warriors ready to hit Earth's cities with a time-to-target of fourteen minutes? I know this is difficult for you, but try not to be an *idiot*. Now get back to work!"

Starscream drew himself up as if he were ready to make more protests, but Megatron's optics brightened in anger, and the charging bands on his fusion cannon began to illuminate. After a jaw-grinding moment, fists clenched and trembling by his sides, Starscream whirled around and shot

away with one final murderous look back at Optimus.

Megatron growled wordlessly after him, then turned back and studied Optimus narrowly. “I trust that you *do* actually have more sense than Starscream thinks you do.”

Optimus only stood by emptily, making no attempt to plead for his own existence. He hadn’t the slightest desire to do so. Execution would have been far kinder than what Megatron had done to him instead. He felt hollowed out, and not merely because of the aching absence of the Matrix in his chest: as if all hope had been carved out of him along with it.

Megatron frowned at him, then said shortly, “Soundwave will show you your workstation and quarters. Do I need to tell you not to go anywhere else?”

“No,” Optimus said dully. And then stirred a moment and then blinked, in complete incomprehension: Megatron was holding out the Matrix. He looked down at it and slowly, jerkily, back up at Megatron’s face. He didn’t understand.

“Do you want it or not?” Megatron said impatiently.

“You’re—giving it *back*?”

“I certainly don’t want it myself,” Megatron said. “If you don’t either, I’ll toss it in a smelter. I’m not going to keep it around as some sort of heroic artifact for someone to make a show of rescuing. Well? Tell me to junk it and I’ll be impressed.”

Optimus couldn’t have cared less about impressing Megatron. He put out his hands trembling slightly to receive it, half expecting Megatron to yank the Matrix back and laugh cruelly as he dropped it to the floor and crushed it underfoot. But Megatron just flipped it into his hands as casually as if it were a lob ball. “Don’t brandish it around, or I’ll make you watch me melt it down,” he said, but Optimus barely heard him; he just kept staring at it in his hands as Megatron turned and walked away.

He wasn’t sure what to do with it. He didn’t feel he deserved to put it back, to reclaim it after he’d given it away. But Soundwave said, “Come,” peremptorily, and if Megatron wasn’t going to tolerate him displaying the Matrix openly, there weren’t many other options. Optimus opened his chest panel and put it back inside. The clamps opened for it eagerly, and it nestled back into place as if he’d never had to tear it out of himself. He hadn’t tried to access it at all, not since he’d agreed to Megatron’s terms, but now he couldn’t help but reach for it in apology, craving a reassurance he didn’t expect to come. But the Matrix returned a wordless flow of warmth and understanding that nearly made him weep, the sensation of hope sparking back to life; he shuddered all over, and had to make an effort to bring himself under control before he could follow Soundwave through the hall, and on to his assigned station.

#

Megatron even kept his word about the open line of communication: he’d set up a dedicated comlink channel to the United Nations. Over the first week, Optimus spoke at length with virtually every human leader on Earth. Incredible as it still seemed to him, they confirmed that the Decepticon raids on Earth had all stopped completely, that human forces had occupied their bases. Optimus listened with half-disbelieving gratitude, but he was unable to answer their questions, questions he himself shared: what were Megatron’s intentions; was he going to break the agreement; if so, when; and what did he want with Jupiter? To that last, Optimus could offer one answer, after overhearing the conversation with Starscream: Megatron had clearly gotten the Constructicons to put together some kind of highly-robust coriolis turbines, and was planning to

install them in the Jovian atmosphere to harvest energy. But then the humans all not unreasonably wanted to know what Megatron planned to *do* with that energy.

“It will be many years before Cybertron is restored, and that work could easily consume all the energy he can harvest or produce for a long time to come,” Optimus said, trying to comfort them, but he didn’t know if he was telling the truth. He wasn’t actually sure why Megatron was so determined to get the turbines up quickly. All three of the Darkmount reactors were going again now: if Optimus put a hand on the walls and turned his sensors to maximum, he could pick up the thrumming song of them deep below, a threatening message coming through the metal. Even one of them should have been more than enough to fuel up everyone still alive on Cybertron and keep them working full-throttle for the next thousand years. With three, Megatron could easily wake every Decepticon warrior in stasis, and start rekindling other reactors all over Cybertron. The Jovian turbines would be useful, of course, but they did not seem *urgently* necessary.

But even that puzzle didn’t seem to offer any threat to Earth. The opposite, in fact. If Megatron had the turbines running, he would have even less need to *bother* pillaging Earth.

The inquiries faded after a few weeks. Optimus simply did not have the information the humans really wanted, nor any way to acquire it, and Jupiter was an almost imaginary place for them in any case: humans hadn’t even reached it with probes more than three times. Soon he was only having one call every day, with Spike and Carly, in which they had nothing new to tell one another.

His workstation was in a tower room high up in an isolated corner of Darkmount, directly beneath the small communications array that maintained the link with Earth. A hatch in the ceiling let out onto the maintenance walkway. During his empty days, Optimus climbed out and stood there with a view for thirty clicks in every direction, likely as good as the one Megatron himself had from the central tower. Slow ripples were spreading out from the Darkmount walls: the outermost one a flattened circle of demolition, and in the others, buildings rising in different stages of construction.

The innermost ones adjacent to the walls were plainly meant as luxurious palaces for Decepticon officers—albeit very heavily fortified palaces; their lower levels were squat and heavily reinforced, and Optimus was close enough to a couple of the elaborate jagged towers festooning the roofs to see that they actually housed powerful shield generators. And beyond them was a massive double security ring of lower barracks buildings, and then a final outer fortification of walls with extensible slabs that could transform from their normal twenty meter height up to a full kilometer. Megatron clearly was investing all the resources he could gather to turn Darkmount into a completely impregnable base of operations; by the time he was done, it would be easier to take the entire rest of the planet and then tunnel through the long way than to take it with a head-on assault.

But beyond those walls, a second ring of towers was going up—also significantly reinforced, and unlovely in their blocky uniformity and small windows, but despite all of that still *residential*, and every night the lights came on in new units. Roads were unfurling out from them to the demolition zone, and a steady stream of travelers were coming back along them, hundreds of newcomers every day. Optimus hadn’t dared to hope that so many of their people had survived the long night of the famine, but they kept coming: some of them limping, unable to transform any longer; others trapped in vehicle mode. They still came.

There was a small outpost at the end of each road, at the outermost edge of the demolition ring, and every evening a shipment of energon in small cubes went out to each one. The new arrivals were fed, and registered, and sent in for repairs and work shifts. A market was already springing up, and a few energon bars—open to the public and not just Decepticons—and there was a bathhouse getting built in the second ring out. Optimus also knew that Ratchet had as much work as he could handle, and four assistants at what would be a hospital in another month, even if Ratchet hadn’t

looked up from his repair tables long enough to have to face the reality of it.

But Optimus himself didn't have enough work to occupy his mind. And so he did have to face the unmistakable new reality forming around him more with every passing day: the reality of peace. Peace on Cybertron and peace on Earth, and it was not—not *yet*—the monstrous peace of downtrodden and brutalized slaves beneath a cruel regime, the horrible vision of Decepticon rule that he'd so long imagined.

He was still confined to his workstation and his quarters, but Ratchet and Arcee were both allowed to visit him freely. They came to his rooms every night to drink their energon ration together, and talk a little. Arcee was doing courier work for her ration, work that took her all over the city and allowed her to report that the Decepticons were keeping the city in ruthless yet oddly fair order. Everyone was being assigned an appropriate ration level for their size when they came in, and then they got to earn it for work: quarter-ration for easy jobs, all the way up to five-ration jobs that were dangerous or dirty. Nobody was allowed to earn more than ten rations a day unless there was a job nobody else wanted to do. And anyone caught stealing energon got summarily shot.

Justice was being meted out through a deceptively simple and expedient process. Whenever a fight broke out, the highest ranking Decepticon soldier—*Cybertronian peacekeeper*, officially—on the spot settled it: generally, whoever was at fault had their ration docked for a day and given to the other. If they wanted, they could appeal to an officer one rank up, but if the senior didn't overrule, they got their ration cut off for a week instead. It went to a month if they went up the chain again, and if they still wanted a shot after that, they could appeal directly to Megatron, and if *he* didn't overrule, he would just shoot you. "For annoying him," Arcee said, dryly.

Ratchet snorted. "Sounds like a capital offense to me."

"Have either of you observed any such cases?" Optimus asked, low.

Ratchet paused and then said, almost reluctantly, "Well—I got lucky the other way around. A mech came in a couple days ago. He wasn't hurt, just trying to hide: a Decepticon was trying to get him to pop his panel." Optimus nodded grimly. "The Con followed him into the clinic—no one we know, one of the new ones, fresh out of stasis. I told him to get out, and when he didn't—I stunned him and threw him out." Ratchet said it almost defiantly, but Optimus only nodded; he didn't blame Ratchet, even if he would have been anxious for him as well. "He had a couple of buddies outside. They were about to pile on, and... Scrapper was going by."

"What happened?" Arcee said.

Ratchet gave a half-irritated shrug. "He pulled up a surveillance record, then assigned all three of them to demolition work on his crew for two years, and told them if they were stupid enough to get damaged in the process, good luck finding anyone to repair them."

"All three?" Optimus said.

"The other two got it for not stopping the first one," Ratchet said, then added, grumpily, "And then he docked *my* energon for the day because I didn't call it in on the complaint channel before shooting. Like I would've expected anything from the complaint channel but more of them showing up to join in the fun."

"The complaint channel?" Optimus said.

"All civilian complaints about 'peacekeepers' are supposed to go on there," Arcee said. "It's open to receive from anyone, but the content is encrypted as it arrives, so you can't see the actual

complaints unless you have the key.”

Optimus looked at her and said thoughtfully, mindful of Soundwave surely listening, “I see. Although it would be difficult to obscure the originating point, I imagine.”

Arcee’s eyes widened, taking his meaning. After that, she began to subtly check up on the complaints during her work. Optimus was braced for her to bring news of grotesque abuse, some intolerable injustice, but instead she gathered only a few more stories, which she shared in a casual way, about the ruthless suppression of bullying and brawling. It should have been a relief—and yet was not, which Optimus found disturbing. It was only rational to expect some evidence of evil, but he did not want to be *hoping* for it.

Later that week he was watching the horizon again, the shapes of mechs coming down the road silhouetted against the spectacular curve of Jupiter rising behind them, when a sudden flare of open flames in the demolition zone caught his vision sensors. He automatically zoomed in and refined the data and stood still a moment: it was the Dinobots. For a moment he thought—*they’ve escaped*—and then—*but Earth*—and was seized by a terrible blankness: what was he going to do? But they weren’t fighting. He scanned the area around them; the only Decepticon anywhere in range was Bonecrusher, and he seemed to be leading them. After another ten minutes, it became inescapably clear that the Dinobots weren’t fighting. They were *working*: they were clearing the ground, and not surprisingly at an extremely rapid pace.

“I saw the Dinobots in the demolition ring today,” he told Arcee quietly, that evening. “I hope that they are well.” She nodded, meaning that she would try to make contact, and he spent the next day half-regretting that he’d asked; he went back to his quarters early and waited for her with Ratchet, tense, hoping he hadn’t sent her to get caught. But when she finally arrived, Grimlock himself came with her.

“Grimlock, my friend,” Optimus said, going to him, holding out his hand, but Grimlock looked down at it and then at him. For a moment Optimus thought, with a sharp lance of pain, that Grimlock would not take it, because—

But Grimlock said, “Me Grimlock not sure you want to shake my hand, Optimus. Arcee come, want know why Dinobots not in prison anymore. Me Grimlock tell you first, then you say.”

Optimus slowly lowered it. “I can’t imagine otherwise, Grimlock. But go ahead.”

“Me Grimlock bored of cell,” Grimlock said bluntly. “Me Grimlock bang on door until Thundercracker come. Me say, Megatron let Optimus Prime out, he let me Grimlock out too. Megatron come. He take me out of cell and show me city. Then he say, me have to decide. If me join up, he let me out. Same for all Dinobots. And me Grimlock say yes.”

“Grimlock, I swore allegiance to Megatron myself,” Optimus said.

“Yes,” Grimlock said, “but that just words. You Optimus give Megatron words and he let humans live. Duh. Me Grimlock give Megatron words for nothing, he let me out of cell. But no. He not that dumb. Me Grimlock have to say yes for real.” He paused, and then went on, “And me not lie. Autobots always say, if Decepticons win, bad things happen. Well, me Grimlock think this not so bad. Humans not die. Autobots not die. Neutrals not die. Energon stealers die, OK. They not need steal energon. Broken mechs get energon for nothing until they fixed. Anybody else do work, they get energon. And work is smart work. Cybertron getting fixed fast. New buildings strong and safe. Me think Megatron doing good job. Maybe he stop doing good job later and then me Grimlock change mind, but right now me glad war is over. So me Grimlock say yes to Megatron for real. Now you know.” He finished and stood looking down at Optimus, waiting.

“I—cannot fault your decision,” Optimus said after a hanging, terrible moment. “It is true that our worst fears of Decepticon victory have not come to pass. I myself cannot—at this time, I cannot for the moment see—a—a legitimate cause—to reopen our conflict.” The words came out of his vocal unit in stutters. He didn’t want to say them, to *believe* them; beside him, Ratchet sat down and buried his face in his hands, and Arcee looked away, her expression crumpled. It made a hellish mockery of all these years of painful conflict: Optimus couldn’t even be sorry that they’d lost. Even that was being stripped away. Now, grotesquely, he could only be sorry that he’d *kept fighting*.

#

The next morning he came to his workstation and found a message waiting in the priority channel that had otherwise stayed empty all this time, an order from Soundwave: *Restriction on movement lifted. Observe daily curfew from 3900-0800.*

Optimus sat with it silently. It wasn’t particularly a surprise. Soundwave had eavesdropped on the conversation with Grimlock, of course. And Megatron had recognized that Optimus had now—said yes for real. He bowed his head.

He almost didn’t want to make use of his new liberty, gained in such a way, but after a moment, he pushed himself up and went out. If he had been wrong—but no. He had *not* been wrong; he would not yield that ground. He had judged Megatron by the only measure available: his deeds, and their remorseless cruelty. There had never been any reason to trust him; there had never been any reason to even *hope* for anything better from him. Not before now.

But if, beyond all reason and all hope, Megatron did truly mean to build a decent and just world, Optimus would not sulk in private misery on the sidelines, doing no good in that world, only because it had been founded upon his own defeat. And if, as he still could not help but think more likely, Megatron did *not* mean to do that, if he was only laying on a thin and temporary veneer of justice in order to bring Cybertron more securely into his grip, Optimus would not hide from that truth, either, no matter what it would cost him to oppose that effort, and how hopeless opposition might be.

He didn’t run into anyone on his way out of Darkmount, part chance and part choice. The halls were largely empty: it was a fortress built to hold a hundred thousand warriors in a world where they now numbered less than ten, even if Megatron was rousing them as fast as he could go. And Optimus deliberately went down the smallest staircase he could find and left by a side entrance guarded perfunctorily by a nonsentient drone that looked at him with one unblinking eye, checked its database, and made no objection to his passage.

When he stepped outside the defensive ring wall, he found the streets shockingly full of life, in a visceral way that seeing them from above had not remotely conveyed. Optimus hadn’t seen this many Cybertronians anywhere other than a battlefield in millions of years. He transformed and drove slowly with the flow of traffic moving outward, and turned off when it reached the market. The central exchange tables where energon was actually being paid out in exchange for ration chits were guarded by a pair of Seekers that Optimus didn’t recognize, mechs who had likely spent the famine years in stasis. The rest of the market was a more ad hoc arrangement full of small display stalls and even more basic hand-to-hand deal making going on, most energetically at a few counters selling energon goodies and small glasses of blackened oil.

Optimus parked himself in a far corner and just *watched*. It didn’t entirely feel real. It was more like watching the vids he’d once shown Spike, of how life had been before the war. This wasn’t anything like the vast arcades of the prewar markets, of course, but it was a beginning.

The crowds died out as the first half of the day waned. Optimus wandered a little aimlessly out with the departing tide and continued outward from the city, past the demolition ring and into the dark and war-torn remnants of Old Polyhex. But even here there was a long-unfamiliar amount of activity and life: the ruins were full of squatters, the more recent arrivals who hadn't yet earned enough work credits to be assigned the limited amount of new housing. Mechs were sheltering in half-collapsed buildings and under tarps rigged between walls, clustered in small groups; a few huddled alone in dark corners and cringed back when they heard his footsteps: the roads here weren't good enough to roll, and almost every step crushed some bit of rubble or debris underfoot.

He didn't disturb the squatters, except by his passage, as he picked his way through the ruins more or less aimlessly. He'd had a vague fear—surely not a hope—that he might encounter some kind of horror or exploitation, a revelation more surprising for its absence. But the shantytown's conditions, though wretched, were not what he was looking for. It was too obvious that Megatron didn't *want* these mechs to be trapped here; he wanted them taking work shifts, living in residential towers, trading in the market. He wanted them bound into the fabric of his empire. He'd move them in as quickly as it could be done—and the Dinobots would accelerate that process; once they'd learned how to do the demolition, the Constructicons would be able to leave it to them and focus completely on building instead.

Optimus slowly began to head back towards the road by another route, and paused as his audio processor boosted a bit of background noise into frontal processing: *please, I don't have and don't hold out on us*, low voices, full of emotions registering as fear and menace. He turned his head, tracking, and followed them to the source, a gap between two buildings, the passage so narrow that Optimus had to slightly scrape his paint to get through even sideways. In the airshaft on the other side, a small mech, flinching and shivering, had been pushed up against a wall by two others, bigger ones whose armor was festooned with spikes and slashes of ultraviolet-reactive paint. Most neutrals had banded into gangs as the war progressed, although the famine had devoured most of them as well; these two seemed at a first glance like remnants.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I already drank it," the little one was babbling. "I only got a quarter—only a quarter-ration today, only a quarter, I drank it—"

One of the bigger mechs shot out a gleaming viblade, its edge fritzing with red pulsing light. "Pole, what'd we tell you to do the next time you got energon?" he said in mock-sorrowful tones.

"To s-s-save it," Pole said. "I was gonna, Leech, I was gonna save my second for you, I s-swear, I just—"

"You sold it for twitch instead," the other spiked mech said, and Optimus realized he was right, of course; the little mech's optics were brightening and fading in irregular waves. The neurostimulation was still operating on his system, although his imminent danger had pushed it to background processing. "You know we can't let you get away with that."

"No, no, please, Redpacker, please, I'm s-sorry," Pole said, putting his hands up, trying to cringe back into an even smaller space as the viblade came towards his optics.

"Put away the weapon and release him," Optimus said quietly.

"Maybe you should mind your own—" Redpacker said, turning, and stopped, looking up at him. Leech looked around, too, and let the little mech go; Redpacker brought out an energy mace. Optimus shook his head. His own weapons systems were still offline, but he wouldn't need them.

"Stand down," he told them, and then swung around, automatically reorienting as a flare of violet light and an explosive rush of air hit his sensors and triggered threat alert.

“What the hell’s going on here?” Skywarp demanded, irritably shoving away a half-toppling girder.

Leech and Redpacker traded a look, and then Leech blurted, “This big guy was tryin’ to get us to hand over our energon!” and pointed at Optimus.

“Yeah!” Redpacker jumped in.

Optimus paused, startled. Skywarp stared at them, incredulous, looked at Optimus, and then burst out laughing so hard he nearly fell over on the unsteady pile of trash; he had to grab onto the wall for purchase. “Yeah,” he crackled, wheezing out his intakes. “Yeah, I just bet. What the hell’s *really* going on here?” he asked Optimus.

“The two of them were attempting to extort energon from—” Optimus paused as he realized that Pole had taken the opportunity to make his own escape: there was no sign of the little mech but a wobbling bit of metal near the opening to a dark crawlspace that none of the rest of them could have fit into. “—another mech,” he finished, dryly.

“It’s two against one!” Leech said.

“Shut up, you slagging moron,” Skywarp said. He looked back at Optimus, then folded his arms and leaned against the wall with a gesture at the two. “Well? Don’t let me interrupt.” Optimus stared at him. Skywarp smirked, viciously. “You weren’t gonna let them *go*, were you? That’s not how things work around here.”

Optimus paused, then said quietly, “I will not serve as an executioner.”

The two mechs darted looks of rising desperation between them, and Redpacker blurted, “I wanna appeal!”

Skywarp laughed. “You don’t get to appeal energon stealing, loser. Although I’d almost *let* you go to Starscream, just for the hell of it.” He gave a jerk of his shoulders, and his guns materialized from subspace; before Optimus could do anything, he had hit both Leech and Redpacker with a pair of full-power blasts that slagged straight through their thin, patchy armor and dropped them, their optics dying before their smoking corpses hit the ground.

Optimus stood over them, his fists clenched, but Skywarp stepped up to him and stabbed a finger at his chest. “Listen, *Optimus*,” he hissed, “if you’re too good to take out the trash, maybe you should stick to your nice comfy tower and stay out of the way. How did you think this was gonna go? You were gonna tell these two dregchasers to be good little mechs and they were gonna quit pulling this kind of stunt? There’s jobs going begging for any mech who can walk a straight line for ten minutes without a servo going out. Instead they decided to stick out here and shake down twitchers and loners for the hell of it. They weren’t gonna stop.” He straightened, his face settling into mean hard lines. “Let’s go. Sightseeing’s over for the day.”

He grabbed Optimus’s arm, and the violent dislocating jolt of teleportation took him; they reappeared over the very tower of his workstation, and Skywarp let him simply drop onto it with a clang; Optimus was forced to scrabble for a hold to keep from plummeting down as Skywarp flew away.

Optimus went back to his quarters still angry. It had been exactly the kind of unreasonable cruelty he expected from the Decepticons. Those bullies had themselves been victims of the war; they needed to be stopped, not *butchered*. And yet...he could not quite give his anger free rein, because he also couldn’t help seeing that Skywarp had been half right. The pair of mechs *wouldn’t* have

stopped—because they almost certainly hadn't been operating alone.

Their condition had been solid overall, but at the same time, they'd still had a scattering of minor forms of damage. That meant they hadn't gone in to Ratchet's clinic—he wouldn't have let them out the door that way—but they'd also had regular access to repairs over the eons of the war. They hadn't just been solitary survivors. They'd been members of an active organization, under some ganglord who had decided to move into the shantytown to prey on the fringes of the rising city, now the best source of energon on the planet. Solo mechs would be their obvious prey, but so would smaller groups. If the ganglord was smart, he'd have some of his people doing work shifts and spying on the assignments at the same time, tracking which mechs went in for work, and how much of it they got, so he could most effectively plan his extortions. He'd be putting people in the markets as well. An entire parasitic organism sending out tendrils and rooting itself into the barely-sparked city.

Optimus sat at his dark workstation without doing anything for several hours more, struggling internally. There was no sense in saying anything about it. If he did, the most likely outcome was that nothing would be done regardless. Megatron would surely ignore any report that came from him, and even if he did give it any credence, he was unlikely to care. If this ganglord was ever stupid enough to get Megatron's attention by interfering with some project of his, then Megatron would move to crush him. Until then, why would he bother? The pressure from the extortion would likely drive more work.

But Optimus was conscious that he couldn't intervene alone. Prowl had dealt with several similar opportunistic gangs moving in the fringes of Iacon, over the long years of the war; Optimus had never been involved personally, but he'd read the reports and understood the general shape of the necessary operations. It took espionage and tracking work to find their headquarters, then building an organized net around the targets and pulling it shut to capture all of them at once. His own odds of tracking them down were small when they had as thoroughly impenetrable a hiding space as the ruins, and even if he did get exceptionally lucky and find their headquarters, going in alone he would at best scatter them into fragmented groups that would then turn into *multiple* gangs.

In the end, Optimus couldn't bear to simply sit on the knowledge, as little as he hoped for any positive outcome. He reluctantly wrote a note to Soundwave, outlining the situation, and even more reluctantly sent it. As bad as it would be to have the gang operating through the area, Optimus could also easily imagine several solutions Megatron might implement that would be more horrible than the actual problem. His forward-projection subunit had just started to elaborate those possibilities in detail, some five minutes after he'd sent the note, when he was interrupted by a reply that said only *report to command center*.

Optimus pushed himself up grimly and went down. He couldn't avoid the central corridors this time, and several Decepticons did double-takes and jumped when they saw him coming, reaching instinctively for weapons before they hesitated and let him pass, eyeing him warily. He had expected as much; what surprised him was how many of them *didn't*: how many ignored him entirely or glanced at him in passing with the most casual interest. To be fair, he didn't recognize more than a tenth of the mechs he passed himself, but it still puzzled him. They were surely Decepticon warriors freshly come out of stasis, but virtually any Decepticon should have recognized *him*, even if they'd only been in the field for a single vorn.

Optimus felt a painful tightening around his spark chamber as he thought suddenly of the tens of thousands of *Autobots* in their own stasis in the sheltered vaults deep beneath Iacon. He had so many good friends down there, mechs he loved and trusted and missed. Virtually everyone outside of high command had volunteered for the terrible stasis lottery. As their energon supplies dwindled, they'd had to run it over and over, each time sending one in ten of their shrinking force

down to sleep until some uncertain future date. It hadn't even crossed his mind to imagine—would Megatron ever agree to rouse *them*? Surely not until every Decepticon warrior had been awakened, and all the prisoners paroled, but...Optimus shook his head and tried to put the foolish hope aside. It was bad enough he was letting himself imagine that Megatron was going to keep any of the promises he'd actually made.

Optimus also didn't recognize the guards on the command center, but those mechs at least clearly did identify him; they barred his way watchfully while checking his clearance. They let him through after only a moment's pause, however. He'd half expected to find the chamber arrayed as a throne room, but instead it was starkly utilitarian, full of screens and consoles bringing in data. Skywarp was standing sullenly by while Starscream yelled at Megatron, “—even *doing*? He should be slag along with the rest of them! Why did we even *fight* this war?”

“Starscream, I'm starting to think you'll never know,” Megatron said. “What are *you* doing back here? We still don't have those turbines working—”

“Go get them working yourself!” Starscream hissed. “Better yet, start the Vos and Helicon reactors working again if you want more energon! Do you think I'm a fool? You're just trying to keep me out of the way!”

“If I wanted you out of the way, I'd *put* you out of the way!” Megatron snapped. He turned to Optimus and barked, “What makes you think they're organized? Skywarp said it was a pair of poorly armored bullies he put down in two shots.”

“Because they were armored at all,” Optimus said. “Because they had powered weaponry. But most of all, because if any functioning gang has survived, this is where they would come.”

Skywarp scowled, arms crossed over his chest, but Megatron just nodded. “Soundwave,” he said, with a jerk of his head, “send Ravage and Laserbeak with him.” Optimus barely had a chance to process—with *him*?—before Megatron turned to him and added, “Take a fivesquad from the barracks and go clear them out.”

Starscream and Skywarp were gawking with roughly as much astonishment as Optimus felt himself. “You're—you're—*giving him a squad*?” Starscream shrieked.

Megatron heaved a deep intake. “Are you seriously questioning his capability for command?”

“I'm questioning *your sanity*!” Starscream howled.

Megatron turned on him, grabbed him by the throat and rushed him in a slam back against the wall. “I'm questioning your continued function!” he hissed. He dumped Starscream gasping to the floor. “He found a problem. Now he's going to *solve* it. Well?” he snapped, whirling on Optimus, his optics glowing. “What are you standing there for? *Go*.”

Optimus left without another word, largely because he couldn't think of a single one to say. The assignment made a certain strange sense, if Megatron really did want Optimus serving as one of his officers. Ravage and Laserbeak would be there to observe him as much as the enemy, and the goal was small and non-critical. This was an excellent mission to try him out on. But *why* would Megatron want that, and why would he imagine that he could *get* it?

Aside, Optimus supposed, with a touch of black humor, from his having written Soundwave to all but ask for the assignment.

It was a deeply strange experience to walk through the Decepticon barracks. There were *no* mechs

that Optimus recognized here: all of the elite warriors who'd stayed out of stasis were surely housed in their own private luxury units in those nearby towers by now. The soldiers he passed saluted him automatically. He sent a tentative request to the base network under his own identification, asking for a currently-idle fivesquad; the central computer instantly handed him a shared unit location, and asked if he wanted them to be assigned to his own command: he was in fact being recognized as an officer by the system.

He found the squad in the unit, four of them running a heavy Lorx session apparently just for fun, even though it was an officer training exercise in Optimus's mind; most Autobots didn't like using their tactical units that hard. The last one was lying on his recharge unit throwing a small target-practice ball at the wall over and over—hitting the identical spot each time—and radiating boredom. They all stopped when he came in, and instantly went to attention as they got the assignment notification; the one on the recharge bed, a streamlined Seeker unit with the designation Fallout, flipped off and onto his feet in a single smooth movement. "Yes!" he said exultantly. "Finally! Something to *do*," and added, "Any chance of combat?"

The ranking soldier, Springload, smacked the back of his helm. "*Sir*," he hissed.

"It's all right," Optimus said gently. "Our job is to locate and eliminate a criminal organization attempting to establish an extortion ring among the mechs in the outer limits, and yes, there's a significant chance we will meet resistance."

Fallout gave a little hop of gleeful excitement. He got alongside Optimus in the hallway as they walked, looking up at him. "You were out of stasis for the whole war, weren't you?" he asked. "I know not all the officers were, but that's gotta be a nonstandard altmode, right?" He waved a hand up and down at Optimus's chest, the boxy lines of the truck cab. "From that rock planet, what was it, Dirt? You must've seen some action."

Optimus glanced down at him in helpless bemusement as Springload hissed, "You're such a moron it's painful."

"What?" Fallout said, looking back at him, indignant.

"Check the designation of the officer you're assigned to!" Springload said.

"Optimus, right?" Fallout said, looking back up, and then stopped so short that Springload and Backlash both crashed into him. Optimus caught the three of them before they all toppled over, steadied them back onto their feet, then turned and continued down the corridor.

He expected that to be the end of conversation, but it only silenced Fallout for a total of 1.67 minutes before he crept back up alongside him and said tentatively, "But, you're—you're with us now, right? You swore allegiance." He didn't wait for an answer to the question, which was just as well since Optimus didn't have one, and blurted out suddenly, "Do you—*know* Lord Megatron?"

Springload made a stifled noise of deep anguished mortification, and Optimus abruptly found himself on the verge of real laughter: it was absurd, and yet it was also, in a bizarre way, wonderful. He was walking freely through Darkmount with five squeaky-at-the-joints Decepticon soldiers, who'd come out of stasis straight into this unbelievable new world where they might never know the horrors of civil war—where, in fact, they were about to follow the former Autobot commander on a mission to protect civilians from a criminal gang—and they were asking him for *gossip* about Megatron. Even the full awareness of how its seductive power served Megatron's ends could not save Optimus from the helpless sensation of joy.

"We've met," he said, firmly repressing the urge to let the laughter burst out; he was confident that

young Decepticons didn't take themselves any less seriously than young Autobots, and he knew how it wounded their pride to feel exposed and silly before a senior officer.

Fallout said in hushed tones, "You—you've probably *fought* him."

"Once in a while," Optimus said, after an even fiercer struggle. "I don't really recommend it. Hello, Ravage," he added, and the five of them startled, looking around, before Ravage padded out of the dark shadow at the corridor junction ahead and looked up at him, his optics flickering to specify a mission channel frequency and encryption key; Optimus opened the connection and brought the fivesquad on, then transmitted the coordinates where he and Skywarp had faced the two gang members. "You and Laserbeak go on ahead," he told Ravage. "It's possible some other gang members will have checked up to find out what happened: if so, follow their tracks and do your best to identify the location of their base of operations."

Ravage confirmed receipt and melted back into the shadows without a sound.

"Wow," Fallout breathed out. "*Ravage*."

"I'm going to kill you while you're recharging," Springload muttered, not quite under his breath.

Optimus pulled down their combat statistics during the trip out to the shantytown zone. Backlash and Springload were both grounders, but Fallout and Coriolis and Windliner were all that same refined Seeker build. It had clear advantages: they were smaller, with lighter armor, but they were incredibly maneuverable; it would've been a challenge to take down any of them, and Fallout in particular would be giving Starscream a run for his money once he got fine-tuned and loaded a few millennia of combat experience into his neural net. At the moment, he had a grand total of four hundred hours flying routine patrols, eleven hundred in simulators, and no live combat experience at all. The others were even worse off. After Optimus finished reviewing the statistics, he was no longer confused why half the new Decepticons around had no idea who he was. He was more surprised that Springload had even recognized his designation. This fivesquad *hadn't* been in the field for a single vorn. They'd been shoved into stasis almost straight off the line.

He randomly checked the statistics for a dozen other active fivesquads and got similar results for all of them. Apparently Megatron had just kept on building warriors—and then putting them straight into stasis—even after he couldn't afford to keep them functioning. Optimus couldn't understand why: it had surely cost energy and resources that Megatron could have used to keep larger numbers in the field. Now, of course, he had an enormous numbers of warriors all ready to wake up and put to work. But he didn't *need* them now, or at least not as badly as he'd needed them *during the war*. Optimus shook his head over it in private bemusement, and put the fivesquad on a very short leash; he called them in for a rendezvous just before the last checkpoint out to the demolition zone.

"All right, from here on, we're keeping a low profile," he told them. "I don't want them to see you aloft, so the three of you will be riding. Springload, you and Backlash take point, and don't get out of visual range."

"Riding what?" Fallout asked.

Optimus transformed and pulled his trailer in from subspace, opening the back. "Hop aboard."

"He keeps this whole thing in *subspace*?" Windliner said, after they climbed inside and he'd shut them in. "How does the pull differential even work?"

"Folds up for the shift?" Coriolis said. The two of them hadn't previously said a peep beyond *yes*

sir, even after he'd told them to call him Optimus. "It's mostly empty space. But his power draw must still be *insane*. Like this whole slugging mission. Are we *sure* these are our actual orders?"

"What? Why wouldn't they be?" Fallout said.

"Because we're following *Optimus Prime*!" Coriolis said. "You know, the *bad guy*?"

"I should mention the trailer is in fact part of me," Optimus told them, making them all jump.

"Also, it's just Optimus, now."

"Yes, uh, yes, sir," Coriolis squeaked.

Fallout, who clearly just didn't have any mortification subroutines, instantly said, "Optimus, how did you end up being named Prime, anyway?"

"I can't tell you," Optimus said.

"What? Why not?" Fallout said.

"Megatron offered me a deal in exchange for my renouncing all claim to the title," Optimus said.

"He has kept his end of the bargain. I don't intend to go back on mine."

"Right, but he just wanted you to stop saying Primus gave it to you," Fallout said. "I'm asking how it really happened."

"You may as well come up with your own idea," Optimus said. "It'll be as good as any. Quiet, now. We're coming up on the shantytown. If they've scattered even minor listening devices through the area, they'll be able to pick up conversation."

#

The operation itself went off smoothly. By the time Optimus pulled up outside the narrow alleyway, Laserbeak was perched on a windowsill waiting for him; he hopped down to Optimus's arm and broadcast a map of the area with a detailed perimeter of the gang's core territory overlaid, as well as a three-dimensional holoscan of the squat former warehouse that they'd made into their headquarters. They'd reinforced the walls with armor plating—nothing that could stand up to full-power military weaponry—and set up some guns, but they were haphazardly placed and had left several approaches uncovered.

Optimus turned to the squad and tapped the holoscan with a finger. "All right, who can see any problems with their setup? Feel free to offer any suggestions for our approach vector as well."

The fivesquad managed to find all the holes in under two minutes with barely any leading, and then promptly got into a heated argument over the best approach that almost came to blows; Optimus had to bodily separate Springload and Coriolis when between one moment and the next they stopped snapping and just went at one another. Meanwhile Fallout was muttering complaints about the pointlessness of discussion and how they could just sail in without a plan at all. It was virtually the opposite of managing Autobots, most of whom would've required half an hour of gentle hints to find the last of the holes and who would have thoughtfully discussed a few possible approaches, hearing out everyone with an opinion, before easily being guided to a consensus option.

In this case, Springload and Coriolis both dug in so hard on what were two perfectly good solutions that Optimus after a moment of consideration looked over the data and chose a third approach instead. "But that's not better than coming from the north!" Springload instantly protested.

“It’s not better than going for the back perimeter, either!” Coriolis said, glaring at Springload.

“You’re both incorrect,” Optimus said. “It is significantly better than either. We’ll discuss why after the operation is complete, once you’ve all had a chance to evaluate in action.” He sent all the fivesquad their individual coordinates. “Get into position on the ground, get under cover, and send a ping on the operation channel when you’re ready. Laserbeak, when I signal you, go ahead and take out their monitoring network. At that point, all five of you get airborne and close in, maintaining visual coverage of the surrounding ground in case any of them attempt to retreat. Set your weapons to twenty percent power.”

“Huh? Why?” Fallout said.

“These aren’t soldiers,” Optimus said. “They’re members of a minor neutral gang of civilian mechs, with civilian-grade power flow systems. At best they’ll have picked up some scrap armor and welded it on, and they can’t do much of that without warping their frames or blowing out their fuel requirements. Even twenty percent will drop them hard. A single full-power shot would obliterate them.”

They all stared at him. “Uh, isn’t...isn’t that...the *idea*?” Springload said. Coriolis nodded. Even Fallout looked deeply confused. Not one of them seemed to have the slightest difficulty with the idea of a violent mass slaughter. Optimus sighed.

“These mechs formed this gang in order to survive the war and famine for which Autobots and Decepticons are responsible,” he said. “Very few if any of them would ever have chosen this life. There is no reason to believe that they are irredeemable.” No reason at all, when *Megatron* was doling out mercy. “We will do our best to capture rather than kill them.”

All five looked equally dubious, but they followed orders. The only death came at Optimus’s own hands: the one mech among all of them who *was* military-grade was the gang leader, who burst out of the base carrying a massive disruptor cannon and blasted Fallout and Coriolis out of the sky.

Optimus had been holding the front entrance when he saw them go down. “Ravage! Hold this exit,” he snapped immediately, and blasted a few chunks off the nearest buildings to create obstacles that Ravage could easily exploit against larger mechs, then transformed and simply drove directly through the base and out the back, smashing through the remaining internal resistance and on through the back door to launch himself at high speed over the heads of the escaping mechs. Coriolis and Fallout were struggling to get back on their feet with the gang leader about to fry them both, clearing an escape route for himself and a knot of core followers. Optimus transformed as he came down, crushing the leader bodily down into his own disruptor, Coriolis and Fallout staring up at him open-mouthed, and then he turned and powered all the way up, leveling his rifle at the bunched-up group.

“Drop your weapons and surrender *now*,” he said flatly. They all obeyed with an instant clatter.

“I still don’t get how that was tactically better than hitting them from the north,” Springload said to Optimus afterwards, with a defiant air, as the prisoners got put into stasis cuffs and chained together for the march back to Darkmount.

“*Or* from the back perimeter,” Coriolis put in at once.

“It was not tactically better in either case,” Optimus said. “It also wasn’t tactically worse. Just as your two solutions were also equally reasonable. All three fell into the optimal space where random chance would have a far more substantial effect on the outcome than the choice among them.”

All of the fivesquad paused, looking vaguely cheated. “So it *wasn’t* better!” Springload said.

“On the contrary. Tactics were not the only consideration. The third solution had significant operational benefits.” Optimus left it there and waited; this was the point at which any Autobot would almost immediately have gotten a sheepish look, but the Decepticons all just stood there frowning deeply, clearly pushing their tac units to the limit in the completely wrong direction. Optimus finally said, gently, “What made the third solution substantially better was *your argument*. If I had made a choice between either of your solutions, one of you would have been pleased, and the other would have been resentful. Both of you would have been more likely to make mistakes. Going into a fight without unit cohesion has a far more substantial effect on outcome than the minor tactical differences over which you were arguing. By choosing a neutral third option, I was able to disengage your emotional attachment to your own solutions and get you to focus on the operation itself.”

They were all very quiet on the way back, in the silence of deep analysis, as if they had to really work at integrating this revolutionary new concept. They were still at it when Optimus dropped them back off in their barracks unit with a few words of approval and the promise of detailed performance reviews over the next few days, and went back to his tower workstation to submit a report. He’d already put the gang prisoners into a spare bank of prison cells and assigned guards—the system continued to have no objections to his taking initiative—and proposed releasing them on the same schedule as Autobots: it seemed likely to him that Megatron would be satisfied, and the pace would be sufficient to break the ties of gang connection.

He sent the report and spent the next hour working on performance reviews for the fivesquad. They were all unusually prickly by Autobot standards, Fallout excepted, but Optimus had enough experience dealing with the prickliest young bots to figure out how to word a little gentle critique and how to reinforce the unit bonds by encouraging them to offer help and ask for it in reciprocal areas. It was familiar work, and the five of them had all done well enough to make it comfortable and easy.

He was wrapping up the last review when Megatron slammed open the door and stalked in, demanding, “What the hell nonsense are you up to now?”

“What?”

Megatron planted his fists on the desk and leaned in over it, optics glinting with anger. “Explain to me exactly how you reconcile *keeping your side of the bargain* with that mysterious nonsense you were spouting?”

Optimus stared at him in total bafflement. “I don’t know what you’re—wait, is this about Fallout asking me how I became Prime?”

Megatron straightened up again, folding his arms. “Did you think I wouldn’t hear about it?”

“I didn’t think one way or the other, and I still don’t understand,” Optimus said. “I avoided making the claim. What did you want me to say?”

“The *truth* would do,” Megatron said through his teeth. Optimus paused, somewhat helplessly. He’d assumed Megatron wanted him to repudiate the claim publicly because it conflicted with his own desire to rule; it hadn’t occurred to him that Megatron thought he’d been *lying* about it, all these years. As his silence lengthened, Megatron’s outrage started to visibly rise. “Or are you actually operating under the delusion that you were *literally* chosen by a mythical deity to rule Cybertron?” he bit out.

“Megatron,” Optimus said, slowly, “Primus isn’t a deity, or mythical. He’s a corporeal entity physically present in the Hall of Primes.”

They stared at each other over the table, another odd dislocating experience; Megatron’s expression was one of total indignation. He spat, “You expect me to *believe* this absurdity? That you found the creator of our species living in the core of our planet, bestowing his benevolent approval upon the rule of *Sentinel Prime*—”

“No,” Optimus said. “He never went to the Hall of Primes. Primus mentioned that the last person to speak to him was someone called Esperan, who brought him back the Matrix. Alpha Trion later found a few fragmentary records that suggest he was the last Prime before the Quintesson occupation. We think—we found two bodies within the Hall, one of them a heavily armored warrior. We think that was him, that he died protecting Primus from the Quintessons. We couldn’t open the door ourselves; when we knocked, Primus opened it from inside and called us in.”

“Where he anointed you as his chosen ruler of Cybertron?” Megatron’s eyes were glowing with rage.

“We went to him and asked for *help*,” Optimus said pointedly. “He placed the Matrix into my chest and he called me Optimus Prime. He didn’t get more specific than that. For all I know, it’s just that I was *there*. It certainly didn’t make me infallible, and I never claimed it did. I only did my best to live up to the trust he placed in me. As I will continue to do for as long as I function.”

Some of the rage was ebbing from Megatron’s face, in favor of a titanic scowl of suspicion and bafflement. Optimus added, “You can go to the Hall and talk to him yourself if you want to. I thought you rejected his judgement, not that you thought he was *imaginary*.”

“And I thought you were *using* this ludicrous fantasy of a loving creator, not that you sincerely believed it yourself,” Megatron said. “I’ve always known you were an idiot, but I hadn’t quite grasped how *much* of one.”

Optimus stared at him. “Fantasy of—but where do you think we came from? Who do you imagine created us, if *not* Primus?”

“Amazing,” Megatron said. “You’re actually asking me that question out loud. We were obviously created *by the Quintessons*, you moron.”

“You can’t believe that,” Optimus said, bewildered. It had never even occurred to him—

“Really? I *can’t believe* that we were created the same way that *every other cybernetic life form* in the galaxy was created?” Megatron sneered. “Every last one we’ve ever encountered, Optimus, all of them built by soft flabby organics who wanted intelligent slave machines to do the work for them. Your beloved humans are well on the way to building their own useful slaves, for that matter. But of course *our* species is different.” He snorted. “I don’t know what you actually saw down there in the bowels of the world, but you clearly just retrofitted it into your existing delusion. A delusion you based on the fairy-tale propaganda that Sentinel Prime used to motivate his troops to overthrow our own fleshling creators.”

“But—Megatron, that’s *not true*. I’ve *spoken* with Primus. I’ve seen images of our past in the Matrix—”

“Yes, the glorious divine artifact,” Megatron interrupted. “Tell me, why *did* you hand it over?”

“To save humanity!”

“Even though you claim it came directly from *Primus*?”

“I’ve already told you, Megatron, *Primus* is *not a deity*,” Optimus said. “And I am *not* delusional, nor do I *worship* him. He’s a living being of immense age and power and wisdom, whom I have personally met. I respect him, I *trust* him; I want to honor and serve his act of creation. But if he wanted me to preserve the Matrix at the cost of the slaughter of humanity, I wouldn’t care what he wanted. Just as I thought you didn’t care what he wanted!”

Megatron was glaring at him again. “I don’t!”

“But then what do you want me to *say*?” Optimus paused, and then reluctantly said, “If you want me to make up some story to tell people—” He stopped and looked away. He would, of course, if Megatron insisted; that certainly wasn’t worth breaking the bargain that had saved Earth. But he hated the idea. *Primus* and the Matrix had been lost to them all for the first time because of lies and secrets and half-forgotten truths that had turned into legends. Of course, that was what Megatron wanted; he wanted to destroy the very title of *Prime*, bury the remnants of the tradition that Sentinel Prime had so twisted and deformed.

But Megatron just ground his jaw like the offer irritated him, and then said, “If anyone asks you again, you tell them you aren’t allowed to so much as talk about the title or the Primacy in any way. Is that clear?”

“Very well,” Optimus said, a little surprised and relieved.

Megatron stood glaring down at him another moment, and then added coldly, “And why exactly did you bring an entire gang of energon stealers into custody instead of executing them?”

Optimus stared up at him. “Why didn’t I *execute* thirty helpless prisoners? You can’t possibly have expected me to do anything of the sort. Are you just annoyed?”

Megatron’s optics flared. “You’re *pushing it*,” he snarled, and turned and stalked right out, which Optimus suspected meant he’d gotten it squarely on the nose.

#

“He—didn’t believe *Primus exists*?” Ratchet said that night, as confused as Optimus himself had felt.

“Perhaps it’s not entirely surprising,” Optimus said. “Remember, many of us know Kup, knew Alpha Trion—we are all at most two degrees removed from someone who lived during the Quintesson era. They are the ones who passed along the knowledge that our civilization predated the invasion. But the Decepticons have no veterans that old. All of them were sparked during Sentinel Prime’s rule—and he used *Primus* only as propaganda to bolster his own regime. Megatron recognized that he was lying and corrupt. Why wouldn’t he decide that it was *all* a lie...”

But he found himself brooding over his energon a long while afterwards. He wasn’t sure why the conversation had left him so distressed. It *wasn’t* surprising. Megatron had never concealed his disdain for the ancient order of the Primes, for any of the scattered remnants of the traditions that had guided their people in peace for eons before the Quintesson age of enslavement had broken the line. His behavior made more sense, in fact, when you knew he thought *Primus* was just a story.

Optimus thought wearily that perhaps it bothered him so much because it illuminated yet again how much had been lost to them of their own past. The Quintessons had done the worst damage, of course. They had deliberately laid waste to every one of the ancient Cybertronian archives they

could get their hands on, so thoroughly that Alpha Trion hadn't even been able to find fragments from the most important ones.

But Sentinel Prime, who should have tried to fix that damage, had only made things worse. After the liberation of Cybertron, he'd claimed the mantle of Prime without ever facing up to the responsibility of that title. He had put on the fragmentary traditions like theater, instead of trying to restore their deeper meaning. He'd ignored and in some cases deliberately obfuscated the parts that didn't serve his own hold on power, willfully.

And he'd feared warmechs, even hated them, because he'd had to fight them first in order to overthrow the Quintessons. They'd been victims themselves, forced to act as overseers for the civilians under the threat of neural control, but he'd never forgiven them—and so after his victory, he'd turned them into disposables, terrorized and controlled themselves.

Primus would never have supported that act, and Sentinel had surely known it. He'd never tried to seek Primus's advice, through all the vorns of his long reign, and that had been a deliberate choice. The way hadn't been impassable: Optimus had gotten to the Hall of Primes with Alpha Trion and Ultra Magnus and Ironhide and Ratchet, and the hardest part had been carrying Alpha Trion down the Tornos Shaft ladder so his worn-out old hip joints wouldn't break down. The only reason that Sentinel Prime hadn't gone was that he hadn't been willing to take the risk that Primus would tell him he was doing something wrong—or that he wasn't the right one for the job. And that alone meant he *hadn't* been.

Optimus had partially been deflecting, when he'd told Megatron that it was just that he'd been there, but it was true in a fundamental sense. He'd *been there*; he'd *gone*, willing to listen. If Primus had given the Matrix to someone else, Optimus would have yielded command without hesitation; in fact, he'd specifically asked Ultra Magnus to come on the suspicion he might well be a better choice. Primus *had* scanned him as well as Optimus, obviously considering, before he'd finally said, "You are not the protector," and had given Optimus the Matrix instead.

Sentinel had never faced that judgement, and all Cybertron had suffered for it, and continued to suffer now. Even after all these years bearing the Matrix, Optimus still only knew the least scraping of what it had once meant to be a Prime, and some of what he knew, he couldn't use. They did have clear records that the Matrix had once served as a host of advisors that the Prime could access freely, drawing upon the wisdom of the past in concrete terms, but Optimus had never been able to use it so. The voices within were too muddled and far away for him to understand clearly. Alpha Trion hadn't known why: his best guess was that they'd slept so long without being roused by a Prime that they had blurred into one another. Optimus had learned to draw upon the Matrix for more general guidance, but it clearly wasn't the same. So often he had reached for the Matrix and gotten only a cloudy and sorrowful sense of unease and confusion back, even as he offered all the options he could identify. He'd felt over and over a clear message that something was missing, something was wrong.

Of course, something *had* been wrong, terribly wrong. He'd been at war with his own people. He'd tried to let the Matrix remind him, even in the worst moments, that the Decepticons were still Cybertronians. But it had been hard. It was somewhat disturbing to wonder if—if *he* would have shown the same mercy, in victory, that Megatron had shown him. Optimus certainly would never have considered freeing *Megatron*, if their positions had been reversed. Perhaps if some enemy force had attacked Cybertron? Even then it was difficult to conceive.

And yet, so far Optimus couldn't actually say that Megatron was a worse *ruler* than Sentinel Prime. He'd waged an unforgiveable and absolutely ruthless war to seize power over Cybertron, without even maintaining the thinnest fiction of mercy or right, but he was oddly enough not

abusing the power he'd gained, or lying about its source.

That confused sentiment lasted Optimus until the next evening, when he went by the cells to see how the other Autobots were, and overheard Thundercracker angrily saying, "Shut the hell up! No, I *don't* wanna shoot thirty civilians in the head, I don't slagging care what they were doing. They're not gonna be doing it anymore. This came from Megatron?"

Optimus halted and went into the watch room, where Skywarp had his arms folded and was glaring at Thundercracker. "What's the matter with you? War's over, all of a sudden now you get queasy over a little dirty work? Starscream sent me to tell you, and if that's not good enough for you, go take it up with him!"

They both jumped when Optimus said sharply, "Is this about the civilians I brought in yesterday?"

"What it's *about* is none of your slagging business," Skywarp said, wheeling around with his optics flaring red. He took a step to Optimus and jabbed him in the chest. "Don't get any idea that you're *one of us* just because—"

Optimus reached up and caught Skywarp's hand and gripped it before he could make another jab, stopping him cold. Skywarp flinched and instinctively tried to pull free and couldn't. "If Megatron didn't want it to be my business, he shouldn't have sent me out to get them," Optimus said, his voice leashed tightly. "And since I did so on his orders, that does, in fact, make me *one of you*. As little as either of us might care for that fact." Skywarp had stilled after three useless jerks trying to get loose, so Optimus let him go again and looked at Thundercracker. "Do not allow anyone to execute the civilians. I will discuss the matter with Megatron myself."

"You kidding me?" Skywarp hissed. "You think you're giving *orders* around here now?"

Optimus turned back to him. "I've just done so, Skywarp. Do you really want to argue them with *me*?" Skywarp gawked up at him. Optimus leaned in slightly, and Skywarp instinctively took half a step back, then stopped, scowling, but didn't say anything. Optimus gave a single hard nod. "I didn't think so. Feel free to send Starscream my way too, if he *does* have any issues," he added.

He turned and stalked out. Anger seethed in parallel with misery through his emotional subsystem: he felt sick for having imagined, for having let himself think even for a moment that Megatron was—anything other than a vicious, brutal, self-serving tyrant, controlling his baser nature only long enough to reach the next short-term goal and unleashing it again as soon as he was there. There *was* no purpose to executing those civilians; the order was meant as a slap to *him*, for having *annoyed* Megatron—and for that meager reason, thirty half-starved survivors of his monstrous war were to die. And when confronted, Megatron would likely only laugh in his face and tell him that was the price of serving a Decepticon ruler—the price for Earth, the price for the lives of his friends—

Optimus was so angry he barely noticed others getting out of his way. If anyone had tried to stop him, he wouldn't have allowed it. But no one challenged him, and there weren't actually any guards on Megatron's private chamber. When the door didn't open, Optimus didn't bother requesting access; he just grabbed both halves and forced them apart with a violent slam and strode into the room—and jerked to a halt.

The room was spartan: a single large recharge unit in an alcove, and a large desk in the center of the room with a dozen holoscreens, positioned along the side to avoid interfering with the wide, panoramic view of Polyhex and Cybertron's horizon beyond. A collection of gladiatorial weapons were hung on the wall, not mere decorations; they were all in serviceable condition. There was nothing else in the way of ornament; it was easy to take the entire place in with a single glance.

Including Megatron, lying sprawled unconscious in front of the desk with a spilled container of energon fallen out of his hand to leave a liquid smear of glowing pink across the floor.

Optimus formed no coherent thought or feeling for several moments. He half-automatically went to Megatron and bent down to do a quick diagnostic: a basic scan indicated Megatron was functioning, but his fuel pump was running at an unusually slow and stuttering rate, and even over the course of a thirty second scan, degrading further. Optimus looked at the energon. He had a small portable toxicity tester in his arm; Ratchet had equipped them all with it, because the Decepticons would occasionally deliberately leave a poisoned cube or two among the stocks they abandoned when they retreated. Optimus brought it out and ran the swab through the spilled puddle. It took a couple of moments of processing before it returned the results: *fatal toxicity, do not consume*. Optimus stared down at Megatron again, slowly managing to work through confusion to formulate an understanding. Someone was trying to—murder Megatron.

As soon as he'd worked himself that far, his reasoning unit abruptly reasserted itself with a rapid and obvious conclusion: *Starscream*. Starscream had somehow managed to poison Megatron's energon, and probably to get the guards who *should* have been on the door removed—

Starscream sent me to tell you, Skywarp had told Thundercracker—but why would Megatron have passed along such an order through Starscream, who was supposed to be on Jupiter anyway? And why would Starscream have sent Skywarp in person instead of simply ordering Thundercracker over comms? The only reason would have been to prevent anyone from finding out about him giving the order. But why would *Starscream* want to have the prisoners murdered?

The answer came almost as swiftly as the question: because *Optimus* would lose his temper as soon as he found out, and come straight here—to be found standing over Megatron's corpse. Which he would indeed be doing, in another ten minutes or so. Megatron's systems were beginning to shut down.

The course of action was obvious. Thanks to Thundercracker having argued with Skywarp, Optimus knew about the plot sooner than expected. He now had a small but priceless window of opportunity. He still had officer access. If he went down to the prison levels and broadcast an anonymous message across the main officer channels that Megatron was dead, confusion would erupt throughout the base. He could then free the other Autobots. They would flee to Earth and re-establish their resistance to the Decepticon regime. A resistance that would shortly be more than justified, because the new Decepticon leader would be Starscream. Starscream, who was violently angry because—Megatron had *shown mercy*. Even to his worst enemy.

Optimus couldn't help burying his face in his hands, emitting a stifled cry of agony into his palms. He shook with it a moment, and then he activated his radio, on a secure Autobot emergency channel, one they hadn't actually started using yet before the end of the war, and called Ratchet.

"I've got—a victim of poisoned energon," he said, thickly, and sent the toxicity report from his tester. "Is—is there anything I can do?"

"How the hell did they get syntexodine in their energon? It's not like it's free-flowing," Ratchet said, but didn't wait for an answer before instantly continuing on. "You need to move fast, but the treatment's straightforward: you just need to get five grams of corbomite into the fuel system. There's a corbomite filter in your emergency kit; if you burn it with your microlaser set to 1300 degrees, you should get at least six or seven grams out of it. Mix it with clean energon and try to use an intake line close to the fuel pump."

Optimus did the work with intense concentration, trying to think as little as he could about anything other than the mechanics. The corbomite filter made a tidy heap of brownish grey ash. One of the

weapons on the wall was a saber with a deep cup over the hilt; he broke the blade off and poured energon out of one of his own fuel lines into it, mixed in the ash, and got an intake line out of Megatron's chest. The energon got sucked up rapidly. Optimus kept his eyes on the struggling fuel pump; in about ten cycles, it started to pick up again, and from there went rapidly back to full strength, until Megatron's optics came back online and he abruptly sat up, shutting his chest automatically with one hand over the high-pitched whine of combat systems instantly going to ready state, and then he paused.

Optimus had temporarily managed to block the awareness that he was *saving Megatron*, until it was, in fact, Megatron sitting up in front of him. Megatron recovered more quickly than he did: he shook himself all over and snarled, "I'm going to rip Starscream's motivator out and ram it down his *throat*," and shoved himself to his feet. Optimus picked himself up a little more shakily. Megatron was grimacing and moving his limbs, having to unlock gears and servos that had begun to stiffen for lack of flowing lubricant. He frowned at Optimus. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, as if *that* was the question, and not—not anything else.

"Did you order them executed?" Optimus said. "The prisoners I brought in?" He wasn't sure what answer he wanted.

But Megatron's optics had already narrowed. "That's how Starscream maneuvered you here, eh? Why didn't he wait until *after* I was dead?"

"I don't think he expected me to find out beforehand," Optimus said. "I went to visit the Autobot prisoners and overheard Thundercracker arguing over it with Skywarp."

Megatron snorted. "Trust Starscream to screw up a perfectly good assassination by being too self-important to handle the details himself." He tapped his comlink. "Soundwave, where is Starscream?"

"*Starscream is in the command center*," Soundwave's voice returned.

"Good," Megatron said. "Find some excuse for telling him that I'm mysteriously not responding to comm. I'll be there shortly. Come on," he added to Optimus, and strode out of the room, picking up his cannon as he did.

"Why have Soundwave tell Starscream you're not responding?" Optimus said, falling in with him down the corridor.

"Starscream just arranged for me to dribble out on the floor of my quarters and be saved by *you*," Megatron snarled, and Optimus had an effort to control his flinch. "I feel he's really earned that extra taste of disappointment."

He was striding at a fast clip, the cannon humming faintly. It was an effort to keep pace with him, as it was with virtually no other mech. Optimus stared down the length of the corridor in front of them: it was a straight shot to the command center, narrowing to the dark door ahead. "Megatron," he said, "*would* you have executed them?"

"Who?" Megatron threw him a look of outright confusion at first, as if he'd already dismissed the prisoners from his mind, then scowled at him in irritation. "Is there a defect in your processor? Why would I have them executed now? Energon stealers get shot as a deterrent. There's no strategic value in having them shot quietly in the dungeons. Let them stew for a few weeks and start putting them out on work details separated from one another."

Optimus fell a few steps behind him on a sharp, painful wave of his own confusion: *no strategic*

value. As though that really was the only thing Megatron actually cared about, and not in the least about *causing pain*. Optimus didn't understand; how could any mech be capable of so much grotesque cruelty if he didn't—*want* to commit it, in some way? Sadism made more sense to him than that degree of ruthlessness.

“Try Megatron again!” Starscream was telling Soundwave over the intercom, when they came into the command center—by a side door, partially concealed from the main platform. “Why wouldn't he be responding?”

“An excellent question, Starscream,” Megatron said, and Starscream startled so badly he nearly tripped, turning. He started retreating, optics widening, as Megatron stalked up onto the command platform and came towards him. “I've got a few others. Like which of my officers would try to kill me with *poison in my energon*. And even more to the point, why I would ever let such a pathetic traitor continue to function!” His voice had risen to a roar, and he'd wrapped his hand around Starscream's throat, hefting him into the air, his optics blazing.

“—wasn't—me!” Starscream croaked out, scrabbling. “Megatron—it was—him!” He pointed at Optimus. Megatron paused, and lowered him a little, loosening his grip, and Starscream hurried on. “Just think about it! Which of *us* would ever try to do such a thing now, in your hour of triumph? I don't deny I've tried to claim Decepticon leadership before now—but that was because I thought, wrongly, that I could lead us to a victory that had eluded you! I hadn't *realized* the full scope of your grand plan. Now I desire nothing more than to serve your vision for a renewed Cybertron! It's *Optimus Prime* who has every motive to try and murder you!”

“You make quite an excellent case, Starscream,” Megatron said. “There's only one small flaw in your argument.”

Starscream paused, halfway to preening. “What?” he said, warily.

Megatron drew him in close and said softly, “He's the one who just saved my life.” And then he turned and hurled Starscream down into a bank of consoles, sending sparks up in a fountain all around his body as he squawked. “A most commendable display of loyalty,” Megatron went on, a mocking tone in his voice. “I found it quite a refreshing change. So much so that I've decided it's finally time to replace you after all.”

Starscream gawked up at him out of the crumpled heap of equipment. “Replace me? With—” He turned a shocked look over at Optimus and then jerked it back. “With *Optimus Prime*?” he shrieked.

“It's just Optimus now,” Megatron said. “And I don't see why not. Even if he *will* have a hard time living up to your illustrious example of scheming and treachery. I'll have to endure such sacrifices for the cause. *Any objections?*” he hissed as Starscream scrambled out of the wreckage, only to find himself staring directly into the barrel of Megatron's fusion cannon, charged to full power and humming loudly. “Consider your answer carefully, Starscream.”

Starscream's eyes darted to Optimus's face and back to Megatron's, and then he said, tightly, “As you will, *mighty Megatron*.” His optics were seething with hatred.

“A wise answer,” Megatron said. “Now *get out of my sight*, you miserable coward, and if those turbines aren't at full power in two weeks, I'll put you in a cell of your own, right by the doors, where you can spend the next few hundred years watching every Autobot parolee walk out past you.”

Optimus went back to his quarters, automatically: his motivator couldn't generate any other actions, so it fell back onto habit. Ratchet and Arcee were already there, sitting on his low chairs and drinking their ration, talking; Ratchet glanced over and asked, "I'm assuming you saved the patient?" and Optimus folded himself onto his recharge bed and pressed his face into his hand again, shuddering. They came to him at once, put their hands on him, asking at first what was wrong, and then falling silent and offering only the comfort of their touch and support. It felt as undeserved as the generosity of the Matrix, and Optimus trembled beneath it.

He told them finally in short, distorted words. They almost didn't believe him. When he finished, Arcee said, bewildered, "But—that's insane. Making you his *second in command*? That's not about keeping you busy, or even—making you do scutwork. They're running the whole *thing* on the military hierarchy. If he actually did it, you'd have enormous power, over everything. What is he thinking?"

"He's thinking he doesn't want to get poisoned again!" Ratchet said savagely. He hadn't said anything after Optimus had told him, stiltedly, which patient he'd helped save, but he'd gotten up and walked across the room to stare blindly out of the one narrow window. He turned around now, his mouth hard. "Don't you get it? It's the single best insurance policy he can get. Optimus isn't going to commit murder. And now any Decepticon with ambitions is going to have to go through *him*, first."

"Except that wouldn't work!" Arcee said. "You think if Megatron died tomorrow, any of the Decepticons would actually follow *Optimus*? They won't give him their allegiance. He doesn't have any kind of power base."

"But I will," Optimus said slowly, as he worked through his own confused emotions and began to understand, dimly.

"What?" Arcee stared at him.

"Megatron is going to release the rest of the Autobots," Optimus said. "And not *starting* in three years. That was—his outer limit on how long he thought it would take." He pressed his hand against the top edge of his helm, wanting the hard pressure against his cranial unit, a solid distraction from pain.

"How long it would take—" Ratchet trailed off.

"To get *me* on board," Optimus finished. "Because once he had me—he'd have the rest of us."

"I don't *understand*," Arcee said. "I don't—why does he want us? It's one thing while he rebuilds Cybertron, but sooner or later, whenever he starts conquering, building his empire, we'll start *fighting* him—"

"Will we?" Ratchet said flatly. She looked at him. "We all just lived through eight million years of war. We got beat, our planet was nearly destroyed. We're going to start up again now? When we've finally gotten back to peace, to our home? When he's got a gun pointed at our friends on Earth?"

Arcee was silent for a moment, her mouth trembling, and then she turned to Optimus. "Will we?" she asked.

Optimus half wished he could turn away. But she was right, of course. The question had to be answered. "Yes," he whispered, brokenly. "We will. If—if it comes to that."

“If?” Ratchet said, bitterly.

Optimus couldn’t bear to leave it hanging there; the next morning he went back to Megatron’s chambers, an hour before he’d been ordered to report to the command center, and cornered him. “You have to know that we won’t stand by if,” he started, with difficulty, only to be cut off.

“Shut up,” Megatron said savagely. He got up from his desk and seized Optimus by the arm and dragged him to the windows and out through the crackle of a forcefield onto the railing, and he swept an arm over the half-circle of Polyhex growing out from the walls. “*This* is all that’s left after I smelted away the rust that you precious Autobots let take hold in our world. You didn’t rise up against Sentinel Prime. While he churned through Decepticons in the mines and on the battlefields to make your comfortable lives, you kept playing along. And you’re going to balk at anything *I* do? Don’t make me laugh. In half a million years from now, when we’ve secured our world and rebuilt our population, and we’ve finally stripped all the moons of this gas giant and the Exploration Corps brings back a dozen target worlds for us to spread to, so we’ll never again be in danger of invasion or extinction, if you’ve been a good soldier, I’ll *let* you bleat a few objections against this one or the other. But don’t you dare try to tell me you’ll *rise up* for the sake of a gaggle of ephemeral organics when you didn’t do it for *us*!”

He shoved Optimus hard back against the wall, his optics flaring with heat and rage, and without thinking Optimus instinctively reached up to him, gripped his arms, and didn’t even realize until he’d done it that he wasn’t fighting back; his combat systems hadn’t come online at all. Power was flowing into his emotional subsystem instead, as if he was dealing with an enraged *Autobot*, trying to feel his way to understanding. “I can’t give you any excuse for what happened to the Decepticons before the war,” Optimus said slowly. “I don’t want to. But I *wasn’t* playing along, Megatron. By the time you started your revolution, I’d found Alpha Trion, and gone to Primus. I too was looking for a way to change what we had become. If only...if we’d found a reason for you to trust us, instead of waiting for you to do the same...” He trailed away, a deep wave of grief and regret swelling up through him suddenly, the devastated ruins behind Megatron’s back coming into crisp focus, the struggling small signs of rebuilding: *this is all that’s left*.

Megatron paused, still gripping him, and then abruptly his combat systems disengaged; he shook his head with an irritated air. “If you had, then what? There was never any basis for negotiation between us. Don’t tell me that you’d ever have agreed to do what was necessary.”

“You believe indiscriminate slaughter and the total ruin of our world was *necessary*?”

“Yes,” Megatron said flatly. “The Quintessons built this world on our backs. Sentinel Prime didn’t change that, even after he supposedly liberated us: he simply replaced the Quintessons with you Autobots. Half our species disposable instead of all of it, and you called that freedom, and carried onward just as before. The world they built had to *end*. The cities *had* to fall. The complacent and satisfied would have resisted—*did* resist—until resistance was crushed. Do you really still think there was some other magical solution? Your charming bauble didn’t seem to enable you to find one.”

Another flaring of grief, bitter in Optimus’s mind: it hadn’t been a failure of the Matrix. The failure had been *his*. “And you think that this *is* a solution? Megatron, there may be peace for this moment, but how long will it last? For every Decepticon like Thundercracker, glad for the end of the war, you’ve got one like Starscream, who *resents* your every act of mercy. Do you really believe he’ll ever be content to be a *Cybertronian peacekeeper*?”

But as soon as he’d asked the question, the answer came with it: Megatron *didn’t*. Of course he didn’t. “*That’s* why you want the Autobots,” Optimus said blankly. “You want to use us—against

the Decepticons. Against—*your own people?*”

Megatron’s face contorted suddenly, and he slammed Optimus against the wall again. “If I could save them by torturing you and every last one of your soldiers to death slowly with my bare hands, *I would*,” he snarled, his voice distorting into savagery. “My Decepticons, who signed on to do what was necessary...I’d do it to save Starscream alone. He’s worth every last one of you as far as I’m concerned. He walked away from your regime when he had a high place of his own, and it looked as though my side didn’t have a chance. But I had to make him a monster, make an army full of monsters, to destroy the monstrous. And now—in his rage and frustrated ambition—Starscream will winnow out the other monsters for me.” He shoved away, turning his back and stalking towards the doors. He paused on the threshold. “And you’ll help me destroy them,” he said over his shoulder, bitterly, “because otherwise you know what those monsters will do to you and your pet humans in turn. And in any case, you’ve never minded killing *Decepticons*. We’re still disposable in your eyes.”

He went back inside. Alone, Optimus took a few staggering steps forward to lean against the railing, bludgeoned by the terrible ruthlessness of Megatron’s design. He saw it clearly now, laid out in his mind like a stolen map, but he didn’t truly *understand*. He couldn’t. If the Matrix had told him flat-out in a crisp clear message straight from Primus that the only way to save and reunify Cybertron was to betray and kill some large number of the Autobots—he would simply have died first. He couldn’t have met that demand. It was too *much* mercy, that Megatron was saving them over his own...but he wasn’t doing that, either. *If I could save them*, Megatron had said, with true anguish in his voice. He wanted to save his monsters. All of them, even Starscream, though Starscream had just tried to poison him not a day ago. But he would kill them himself before he’d let them stand in the way of—of *what?*

The world had to end, Megatron had said. As if, all along, he really believed he’d been—performing some grim and desperate surgical procedure, carving away the rusted and crumbling body of their society to save a small shining core from degradation, preserving just enough of them to build a new world. A world without the fault line that the Sentinel Prime had carved down the middle, without disposable mechs, without Autobots or Decepticons. A world—like the one that had once been, the one that Megatron wanted back, even though he didn’t believe it had ever existed. The world that the Quintessons had destroyed.

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“You don’t believe that,” Ratchet said flatly. “Optimus, you can’t possibly believe that Megatron sincerely was trying, all along, to do something *good*.”

Optimus didn’t answer him right away. “Good...I don’t know if I can bear to call it that, Ratchet,” he said finally. “The idea that it could be *good*, all this destruction and slaughter...I can’t accept that. I don’t believe there was no other way. But I can believe that Megatron thought there wasn’t. That it was the only way *he* saw. A path as terrible and cruel to him and his own people as to the ones who opposed him. I don’t think he was *right*, Ratchet, or for that matter that he’s right about the way to move forward now. I only think that he’s telling me *his* truth. And if I’d tried, if I’d ever really tried to listen, before...”

“Then he’d have done his best to use it against you and us to win,” Arcee said.

“Not if I’d been able to show him another way,” Optimus said. “If his true goal was the restoration of a just society, if that’s what he really wanted, that’s a goal we have always *shared*, Arcee.”

“He doesn’t want a just society!” Ratchet said. “He wants to shove the injustice off onto other innocent sentient beings! He wants to make us *into* the Quintessons. I’d *rather* we were

exterminated.”

And Ratchet was right, of course—but Megatron had been right as well, when he’d said that Sentinel Prime had done the same thing. Optimus felt a strange thrumming urgency throughout his systems, a sense of pressure. To do what, he didn’t know; he felt as confused and adrift as he ever had in his existence, very much as when he’d first found himself chosen by the Matrix: bewildered by incomprehensible input and the intense drive to take action in *some* direction. He hadn’t known what to do in those days either. He’d still been struggling to find his way when Megatron had raised his terrible banner and begun marching across Cybertron with fire and sword. At the time, it had seemed to Optimus to make his course clear: he had to stop the slaughter. And he’d spent the last eight million years desperately trying to do just that, and to preserve the heart and spirit of the Autobots even in the face of their terrible war.

He had managed to do that much, to hold them together and keep them from becoming the monsters they’d faced—the army of monsters Megatron had built. But he had never been able to stop Megatron. Megatron was the one who’d stopped the slaughter—as soon as he’d finally crushed all opposition. Optimus couldn’t help wondering now, struggling with it, if only he’d tried to reach across that gulf of death and destruction before it had grown so wide...

“Megatron saw the injustice in what Sentinel Prime did to the disposables,” he said. “If his goal truly was to *fix* that, and not simply to take vengeance, or power for himself—then perhaps he could learn to value justice for *others*, too.” Ratchet was shaking his head in violent rejection, and Optimus couldn’t blame him. “Perhaps not. But—I think I have to try and persuade him.”

Megatron didn’t exactly make it easy. Optimus didn’t get halfway through a first sentence the next morning before Megatron snapped, “Just because I haven’t *smelted* you yet doesn’t mean I’m going to let you bleat at me like I’m one of your overlubricated minions. Shut up and go deal with the perimeter properly. I don’t want any more gang leaders getting clever ideas.”

“What?”

“Despite the impression you may have gotten from Starscream’s behavior, being my second in command isn’t a sinecure,” Megatron said.

Optimus said helplessly, “Megatron, if you truly wanted to secure the outer perimeter against infiltrations like minor gangs, you’d need Soundwave to expand surveillance by at least ten clicks, and organize two hundred warriors to run patrols on a regular—”

“I’m not asking you for *advice*,” Megatron said. “Go and *do it*.”

Put together a patrol force of two hundred warriors under his own command? That was larger than the entire Autobot army had been for the last several million years. Optimus had to consider several different reactions, from twitching bewilderment through justified but impotent outrage, and landed finally on sheer exasperation: Megatron was doing this on *purpose*. “Fine,” Optimus said shortly, and turned. “Soundwave, you’re with me.” Then he accessed the Decepticon central command database, asserted top priority—the system let him without so much as a flicker of hesitation—and assigned himself an entire strike force of Decepticon warriors. Then he turned on his heel and stalked out of the command center.

He left it to his background processing to generate a schedule for the individual fivesquads to run half a dozen patrol simulations over the next week, giving him at least one chance to directly supervise each team; he imagined they would all be as squeaky as his original fivesquad. “How many surveillance points can you install in the next three days?” he asked Soundwave, who was silently pacing him through the corridors.

“Twenty-three,” Soundwave said.

It seemed a slightly low number. “Why only that many? Do you have other assignments that take priority?” Optimus said. He felt fully prepared to order Soundwave to preempt other tasks. If Megatron didn’t like it, he could deal with that however he liked.

“Perimeter not secure,” Soundwave said. “Installation involves exposure. A secure position must be established for each operation.”

Optimus frowned at him. “I wasn’t planning on sending you out alone. I’ll cover you.”

“Under those conditions, two hundred seventy-six installations feasible,” Soundwave said.

“Two *hundred*—” Optimus paused. “Soundwave, why did you *begin* with the assumption that you had no cover?”

“Reliable cover rarely available,” Soundwave said.

“Are you saying Megatron wouldn’t let you take a couple of Seekers to guard your back if you needed them?”

Soundwave shrugged slightly. “Seekers under Starscream’s direct influence not reliable.”

Soundwave’s conclusion made excellent sense when Optimus evaluated it from that perspective: Starscream would have had an immensely better chance of success in overthrowing Megatron if he had gotten rid of Soundwave first, or at least temporarily disabled him. It immediately occurred to Optimus that a wide swath of Decepticon procedures and decision-making chains were almost certainly based on similar mistrustful assumptions, at a variety of levels.

And with those assumptions *removed*—twenty-three installations had seemed low; two hundred and seventy-six was astonishingly high. Jazz could have set up perhaps fifty surveillance installations in the same timeframe, if he pushed himself hard. Soundwave was exceptional, of course...but Optimus couldn’t help but think of the young fivesquad lying around in their quarters playing Lorx for fun, and their quick, sharp efficiency in the field. With only a modest increase in collaboration and trust, Decepticon military performance would surely skyrocket. And he and the Autobots would provide that increase without even any conscious intention to do so, only by being trustworthy themselves. Another piece of Megatron’s terrible and razor-precise design.

Optimus spent the day in silence and bleak processing cycles. Soundwave wasn’t given to chatter: he systematically identified a target location, quickly fashioned a discreet housing for his sensor units out of scrap materials in the area, ran a few tests, and moved on. They worked quickly. Optimus kept his rifle out and his scanning sensors at full power, broadcasting a low-frequency signal with a standard message: *Cybertronian peacekeeper on duty*. He picked up a handful of intermittent signals and possible life signs, but they faded almost as soon as they entered his perception: no one approached them. They covered a full third of the perimeter in only half the day, and when they paused, Soundwave ran a more thorough diagnostic that brought up an enormously detailed surveillance map of the region, full of information that Optimus hadn’t expected from basic sensors.

“How are you getting this data?” Optimus asked, highlighting the scrolling window reporting the rough materials composition of the trash in each location.

“Analysis of reflected audio signals,” Soundwave said briefly.

Optimus shook his head a little, disturbed once again. He’d had no idea it was feasible to determine

that kind of information from audio: it surely had to require processing truly astronomical amounts of data. Which Soundwave could apparently do—now that he *had* those enormous amounts of data. It would undoubtedly prove very useful. The Constructicons would be able to speed the production of new housing. And that, in turn, would mean more hands to do Megatron's work...

Optimus heaved a deep breath and stood up. "Let's move on," he said quietly.

They kept going until late; Jupiter was only a thin golden-red sliver on the horizon when Soundwave finally said, "Performance levels dropping below optimal."

"All right," Optimus said. "We'll pick this up tomorrow," and started to turn, only to continue the movement into a quick circle kick that tripped Soundwave to the ground, out of the way of the stunner blast that would have hit him right in the back, and leveled his rifle at the source, a heap of rubble where a tower had collapsed, long ago: someone with stealth mode had to be hiding in there. "Come out and surrender, or I'll return fire," he called, and then twisted just in time to grab the hand coming for his back—

He froze with his hand around her wrist. "Elita," he managed.

Moonracer came out from the tower rubble with a stunner rifle leveled down at Soundwave. "Stay down, Decepticon," she said. "Should I stun him, Elita?"

"No," Optimus said, putting out his other hand.

"Wasn't asking *you*," Moonracer said coolly.

"Not yet," Elita said, her low rich voice sliding over Optimus's audio sensors like energon in low-power state. Her mouth was downturned. "Optimus. What are you *doing*?"

The war had only ever separated them by physical distance. She had been his closest ally and his dearest friend and lover long before he'd even become Prime. They had been rebuilt in sequence, one after the other on Alpha Trion's table, as the old engineer had made his small handful of recruited volunteers over into bodies that could defend other Autobot activists against Sentinel Prime's military enforcers, accepting that they risked death in the process. And they had thought alike even before then. Optimus knew that Elita wasn't asking about sensor installations. "Elita," he said, deep with a mingled joy and sorrow. "I am very glad that you still function. You were reported as destroyed in the Decepticon records."

"That was the *idea*," Moonracer muttered, behind his back.

"Megatron offered peace terms for Earth in exchange for a public display of cooperation on my part," Optimus told Elita softly. "That...is how it began. Since then the situation has grown more complex, beyond what I can describe briefly. I would be very grateful to discuss it with you, and hear your thoughts. Would you consider coming in and accepting the offer of amnesty?"

Elita looked at him silently for a moment, and then she shook her head. "No," she said. "Optimus, if there's no other explanation, if there isn't something else going on here, then what you're doing is allowing Megatron to use your guilt over the fate of Earth to compromise you. You wouldn't have been responsible for whatever the Decepticons did to them. But if you keep helping Megatron now, you *will* be responsible for what he does in future."

Optimus bowed his head before her unyielding clarity: she had always been the most certain and uncompromising voice in their inner councils. He could not truly argue with her now. He more than half wished that he could restore that clarity in his own heart. "I cannot agree that I was not

responsible for what would have happened to Earth,” he said. “But neither can I dispute your conclusion. I only have hope...that what he does may not be evil.”

“You can’t be *serious*,” Moonracer said.

Elita gently reached up to his face, placing her warm palm against his cheek. “Optimus. Listen to me. You’ve made a mistake. I don’t blame you: I can’t imagine how hard it’s been, suffering through defeat, and having to fear for humanity, blaming yourself for all of it. But you must see that Megatron is using your own heart against you. Your hope is his *weapon*. You can’t do this. Come with us, now. We’ll find a way to get the other Autobots free—”

Optimus covered her hand with his, and she stopped speaking. Her lips pressed together. “Forgive me,” he said. “You may be right, Elita. I may be making a terrible mistake, one I will regret. But my processing is not distorted. And...I must choose hope. So long as I see even the slightest possibility of it.”

Elita was silent for a long moment. Then she shook her head a little and said, “Optimus, I must ask you for my harmonizer back.”

He controlled the flinch. She had every right. But opening his chest panel and detaching the harmonizer from his primary neural column was almost as painful as removing the Matrix had been, though a far more personal agony. His frontal processing began to grow sluggish and unbalanced as soon as he’d removed it, but Elita was already holding out his own harmonizer, removed from her systems. After he slotted it back into place, equilibrium returned, but with a taste of ashes.

Moonracer had already gone, unnoticed. Elita stepped back, looked at him one last long time, and then turned and vanished into the dark, disappearing from his sensors almost as quickly. Optimus stood looking after her for a long time, until finally he turned and found Soundwave standing and watching him, silent and unperturbed.

#

“You knew,” Optimus said flatly. “You knew Elita was nearby.”

Megatron snorted without looking up. “You said it yourself. Anyone left on the planet who can function enough to move is coming here. If she *had* been destroyed, the remnants of her crew would have come, at least.”

“This was a test of my loyalty, then?”

Megatron shrugged. “Congratulations. You passed.”

“And if I hadn’t?”

“I’d have launched a tactical strike on the two of you using the tracker Soundwave put on you this morning when you went out together,” Megatron said. “There were three squads on standby. And then I’d have started over with Ultra Magnus.”

Optimus found his hands clenching at his sides. It was a familiar sensation, and not less terrible for that. Something similar had happened during the war perhaps two dozen times, each one a disaster on almost a fatal scale: the fall of Iacon, the loss of the moon bases. Their final defeat on Earth. Each time he’d recognized, too late, that he had been enmeshed within a series of events that Megatron had *planned out*, every step of the— Optimus drew a sudden sharp breath, realizing just how many steps behind he was. “How much longer would it have been, the other day, before

Soundwave came up to your quarters to dose you with corbomite himself?" he said tightly.

Megatron grunted in an almost *approving* tone. "I have a corbomite release unit attached to my fuel lines anyway; I had it timed to go off automatically in another ten minutes. I didn't drink Starscream's adulterated energon until Soundwave alerted me that you were on your way to my quarters."

Optimus drew a sharp breath, somehow still astonished even though he'd already figured it out for himself. "You drank Starscream's poison just to see what I'd do?"

Megatron shrugged. "If you hated me enough to hand Starscream the Darkmount reactors and a Decepticon army of nine thousand and counting, there wouldn't be any working with you."

Optimus clenched his jaw hard. "And now you believe there is? Do you expect me to hunt Elita and her team down for you?" He felt angry at himself all over again for having imagined there was any chance of understanding between them. If Megatron truly thought he could demand that Optimus bring him Elita's head as some sort of token of loyalty—

But Megatron said unexpectedly, "Of course not," in faintly impatient tones. "We need her out there."

"What?" Optimus said, and then Megatron did finally straighten up to look him in the face, coldly, and Optimus began to understand, in rising horror, even before Megatron said, "I'm not the only one with followers who won't accept peace."

Of course he was right. There would be Autobots who refused to accept his rule when they were paroled, even if they came out and found a world at peace. Ironhide would never... Brawn, Cliffjumper... Once again, Megatron was not being willfully cruel. He was only inexorably, mercilessly pursuing his vision for peace, and identifying those who would threaten it.

Optimus dragged in a shuddering breath. And if *he* accepted Megatron's peace, if he kept working with Megatron—the others would go to Elita. Just like the worst of Megatron's monsters, gathering around Starscream. And both those groups would become the small fringes around the middle ground that Megatron was determinedly seizing—the ground on which he meant to build his new army, an army enormously more powerful than either side had been alone, an amalgam of Autobot collaboration and Decepticon power. And with that army, he'd be able to destroy everyone who still rejected the shared peace.

And that... *would* be Optimus's responsibility, as Elita had said. When she came for Megatron's peace, for the world he was trying to rebuild, her death and the death of all the Autobots who had chosen to follow her would be on his head. Optimus had thought just the other day that he couldn't have borne it himself if he'd been offered peace, a reborn Cybertron, at Megatron's price. It made him feel like a blind fool to realize that of course, that was exactly the offer he was being made. "No," he said, his voice breaking. "No."

Megatron's mouth twisted in a mirthless smirk. "Oh, don't fret, Optimus. I'll spare you the oil on your hands when it comes to it. Call it a fair trade. You'll take care of Starscream for me, after all."

His own jaw tightened as he said it, and he looked away a moment, that real anguish visible for an instant once more. A crack in the impenetrable armor, and Optimus said "*No*," again in desperation, and reached for it: he stepped towards Megatron, who instantly shifted into combat-ready mode, but Optimus manually overrode his own defense systems, putting himself into easy range, vulnerable and open, and put his hand on Megatron's arm. "Megatron. Yesterday you spoke to me of the ruin of our world—all that we've lost, all that's been destroyed. And I realized then,

for the first time, that I had never imagined—my worst failure, I think—that you *cared*. That you could look at our world and our people with—with *love*, and condemn them to destruction anyway. I couldn't have done it. No matter the cause. I *can't* do it. And neither can the other Autobots. Even if Elita *won*, if she managed to destroy you and overthrow your peace, but she had to kill me and half the Autobots to do it—she and the remaining Autobots would be destroyed by that very act. We *cannot* walk that path. If you divide us this way, you won't get half of us to use, you'll get a heap of twisted scrap.”

But Megatron's face was already hardening with impatience: as though he thought Optimus was just wasting his time, refusing to accept the brutal necessity. Optimus shut his optics for a moment, struggling to find the words, and then he heaved a terrible, painful breath, and whispered, “This is *not* the only way. It's *never* been the only way. But—if it is the only path *you* are willing to follow, then—then you should execute me and all the other Autobots now. Save Starscream and the other Decepticons instead. And—continue on without us, after all. To a Decepticon future, and not a Cybertronian one.”

He finished softly, and opened his eyes again to find Megatron staring at him now in baffled outrage. “And what about your pathetic human friends?” he snapped.

“We'll care just as much about the next sentient beings we meet,” Optimus said. “You said you'd let me ‘bleat objections,’ but you must realize I'd not only object, I *would* rise up against you and die before I watched you invade the homeworld of another sentient species. If this isn't just a temporary move on your part, if you truly want to integrate the Autobots into the society you're building—you will have to *listen* to our objections. And before you say it again,” Optimus added, “it's true that you could have some of us anyway, for the price of peace. But the ones who'd take that bargain...those are the same mechs who did look away when Sentinel Prime offered the same bargain to them. And—as difficult as it has been for me to conceive—I am beginning to think those aren't the Autobots you truly *want*.”

Megatron's optics had been going increasingly incandescent with fury, his combat systems rousing up again and broadcasting a truly terrifying level of threat, and when Optimus finished, he suddenly erupted into violence, seizing him by throat and chest and slamming him across the room and hard against the wall, the impact hard enough to rattle all of Optimus's joints and set off all his alarms. It was a significant effort to keep his own combat systems from coming online; his motivator tried a dozen times in the span of thirty seconds before Optimus managed to get it to register that Megatron wasn't actually damaging him, and even then it dropped the request only reluctantly. But Megatron *wasn't* harming him, and he didn't, either, although he stood there holding Optimus pinned by the throat with his eyes pulsating, obviously wanting a fight—

Wanting a fight. The revelation erupted through Optimus's mind like standing in the direct light of a supernova: all these years, these terrible endless years, he'd been facing Megatron—on *his* ground. On the ground of violence, and war, and brutality—the ground that warmechs had been built to endure. Of *course* Megatron had won. He was the only one who could have. What he'd just told Megatron, about how even victory would destroy the Autobots—it *would* have. Even if the only ones they'd destroyed had been the Decepticons. If they had *won* the war, and looked around at the heaped corpses of their enemies—if he himself had ever stood over Megatron's broken body and offered him mercy, offered to let him live, in a purely *Autobot* world—and Megatron had *refused*, as he *would* have, Optimus now saw in stark clarity—

All this time, he'd been following Megatron down that oil-slicked road, as if it could ever lead to anything but the very destruction he'd wanted to avert. *We're still disposable in your eyes*, Megatron had said, yesterday—an accusation he'd thrown out in passing, with no doubt of it, because he'd never been given evidence to the contrary. If instead—if only instead Optimus had

ever before been able to stretch his heart wide enough to *refuse* to fight—to care about the Decepticons enough to make it as unimaginable to fight *Megatron* as Elita—

Optimus put his hand up to cover his face as a distorted gasp of agony broke out of him, his emotional subsystem spiraling out of control and disrupting his motor systems. Megatron twitched as the audio crackled through Optimus's constricted throat, and jerked his hand back, as if the sensation had transmitted through the armor. With the hold removed, Optimus sagged helplessly, listing to the side and starting to go down; he couldn't pull his conscious processing out of the shuddering anguish.

But he didn't finish the slide to the floor. He halted without knowing how, breathing in jolting, irregular cycles, his fans grating with a horrible burr, lubricant leaking from his optics. The first wave of agonizing regret eventually passed, settling painfully into his understanding, and Optimus finally managed to draw a steady breath and established motor control over his legs again, taking his own weight back—back from *Megatron*, who was *holding him up*, despite the fury still written on his face.

Optimus stared at him, still shaky, and after a moment, Megatron let go of him, twisting his hand away into a violently irritated wave, as if he didn't want to admit to himself that he didn't mean to rip Optimus's throat out. "Do you think I'm going to be moved by pathetic whimpering? Not the only way, indeed. Go on, then. I'd like to hear your plan for how you're magically going to make the most savage Decepticons coexist with the most rigid Autobots."

He spoke tauntingly, aggressive, but—he *wasn't saying no*. Optimus discarded the tone and let his processor work on the problem seriously. "We've all learned to hate and fear one another," he said, his voice wavering unsteadily. "We have to unlearn that lesson. We need—some process of reconciliation."

"Yes, that's a magnificent idea. Anything of the sort would immediately provoke Starscream into a frenzy," Megatron said, dismissive.

"You've already provoked him into a frenzy," Optimus said, managing a touch of dry humor as his systems continued to stabilize. "What's a little more?" Megatron glared at him, but Optimus was already iterating on his own words, a new idea forming. "Perhaps he *does* need more. You made me second in command. That means I'm his superior officer now."

Megatron snorted. "Do you want to go to Jupiter and try ordering him around?"

"Yes," Optimus said, and added as Megatron stared at him, "And I want *you* to let Ultra Magnus out. And start ordering *him* around."

"What?" Megatron said incredulously.

But Optimus was certain already, that rare sweet sensation he'd only ever felt before during *internal* Autobot decision-making, when he felt he'd understood what everyone around him needed, and had found a way to give it to them. "We need to close the distance between the extremes. So you'll send me to Jupiter. And afterwards, you'll release Magnus, and I'll have Ratchet and Arcee tell him that everything depends on his following your orders. No matter what. And because he can't speak to me directly, he'll assume that means I have a plan he doesn't know about."

"You want to deceive your own officer?" Megatron said, raising one brow. "How very Decepticon of you, Optimus."

“I’m going to need your help to do it. I won’t actually be able to lie to his face. You’ll have to find a way to keep him from communicating with me.”

Megatron shrugged. “I’ll tell him that if Soundwave so much as catches one signal going between you, he’ll execute one of your people. That should do. You do realize you’re offering me an irresistible opportunity.”

“I hope so,” Optimus said, and Megatron’s optics narrowed. “You’ve already *got* the opportunity to destroy us, Megatron. I’m trying to give you the chance to *save* us—us and your own monsters, too. Magnus would never willingly follow you under any other circumstances. But he’ll do it this way. And if you can get through to him before I come back—just enough to convince him to listen to *me* when I ask him to give peace a chance—”

“Get *through* to him? If you have some fantasy that I’m going to send him to build medcenters on Earth or something idiotic—”

“What actual assignment would you *want* to give Ultra Magnus? If you could trust him to do it well.”

“Planetary security,” Megatron said immediately, in challenging tones.

“You couldn’t pick better,” Optimus said. “Give him that fivesquad I used in the gang operation, too. Get him working with some young Deceptions, thinking about *Cybertron’s* security instead of Autobot security, taking your orders—and soon he’ll find it difficult to walk away from the peace himself. You could *try* not to actively antagonize him along the way, if you wanted to give yourself a challenge,” Optimus added, with a ghost of amusement. “But I wouldn’t want you to strain anything.”

Megatron glared at him. “I don’t know where you’ve gotten the idea that I’m going to do *any* of this.”

Optimus looked pointedly down at Megatron’s other hand, which was still resting on his chest, right over the place where the Autobot sigil had once been. Megatron stared down at it incredulously, as if he felt betrayed by his own body, but before he could say anything, Optimus covered it with his own. He said quietly, “I can’t force you to do anything. All I can do is ask. So I’m asking. Please.”

Megatron jerked his hand back, turned away, and stalked towards the door. But just short of it, he said over his shoulder, “I’ll indulge you temporarily—for the entertainment value, and because I *do* need those turbines running. Have fun collaborating with *Starscream*, Optimus. I’m sure it’ll go splendidly for you.”

He swept out of the room, and Optimus took a deep breath on a wave of mingled gratitude and dismay.

#

Optimus reviewed the scanty reports about the turbine project during the shuttle ride over to Jupiter. He thought at first that he was misunderstanding: it seemed as if Starscream had been devoting a negative amount of work to the operation. Ramjet and Dirge were with him, supervising the drones, and the little they’d done, he’d ordered them to undo twice already. Optimus read it all over again in confusion. The Constructions had done virtually all of the heavy lifting, building the turbines on Cybertron. The task shouldn’t have required more than finding a decent windstream within the tolerances of the turbines and getting them positioned correctly; after that it would only

be maintenance. The whole operation seemed completely obvious. He still didn't understand *why* Megatron wanted the turbines so badly, since it would have been easier by far to maintain additional reactors on Cybertron, but he even less understood why Starscream hadn't just got them going within a month.

The answer to that second question became apparent when Optimus came off the shuttle and found Starscream giving a rousing and deeply treasonous speech to half a dozen Decepticons who shouldn't have been there in the first place: Astrotrain was among them, and he'd evidently brought the others over to enjoy a friendly recruiting and plotting session. "*We* won this war for Megatron," Starscream said. "You all know it. And now he doesn't want to share any of the glory. Just watch. One after another, he'll sideline us all. He'll let the Autobots back out, now that they're nicely cowed little drones, and give *them* the plum assignments and rewards."

"I guess then at least the assignments might get done," Optimus said dryly, and Starscream and the audience all jerked around and stared at him. "It's nice to see so many of you out here to help get the turbines in place. Why don't we get started?"

The whole pack of them formed up around him, a ring of menace—all of Megatron's worst monsters, the Decepticons it had been so easy to despise and fear, all this time—and Starscream, smirking in the front, purred at him, "So, Optimus, you thought you could just waltz in here alone and start giving orders?"

Optimus had long-established threads ready to be invoked in situations like this, full of combat triggers and cold verbal condemnation, steely resolve. Several of them automatically tried to request processor time, and he had to manually put them aside, force his strategic unit to reevaluate the situation. These weren't his enemies to defeat. These were mechs he had to *save*. Because if he couldn't save them, he couldn't save Elita, either.

That realignment was the first and hardest step; once he'd pushed his brain through it, the second came smoothly, generating itself almost instantly out of a rapid cross-linking: the eons of data from the war, and his recent experience with the young Decepticon foursquad. "Starscream," Optimus said, in a conversational tone, "you've tried to murder Megatron maybe thirty times that I know about. Do you know why he hasn't killed you for it?"

"He can't afford to. I'm a critically necessary officer," Starscream sneered.

Optimus nodded. "All right. Now, can you think of a single strategic or tactical reason why *I* wouldn't kill you? Same question goes for the rest of you," he added, as the smirk fell precipitously off Starscream's face.

"Megatron would destroy you!" Starscream said.

"I don't think he would, actually," Optimus said. "After all, once you were gone—I'd be a critically necessary officer."

"And you seriously think you could beat all of us?" Starscream's optics had gone narrow and furious.

"Try me and find out," Optimus said cheerfully. "Anyone want to go first?"

Everyone instantly looked at Starscream—he'd set himself up for it neatly—and Starscream stared up at Optimus, his jaw sliding back and forth almost invisibly, furious. "Perhaps you're right, Optimus," he said after a moment. "You *could* be a very valuable Decepticon. Generous of Megatron, letting you switch to the winning side this late in the game, but—better late than never, I

suppose. I wouldn't really have expected you to be so *enthusiastic* about it, although I imagine it does beat sitting in a cell with the rest of your minions."

It would have been a very effective dig if Optimus hadn't actually been there trying to save Starscream's life. As it was, Optimus only said, "I'm glad you see it that way. All of you fuel up and let's get these turbines going."

Astrotrain balked at being asked to maneuver the turbines into place, even though he was clearly the ideal mech for the job. "My intakes will be shot, and I'll be venting methane for weeks! Have the drones do it!" He folded his arms and glared at Optimus.

"We can do that," Optimus said equably. "We'll all be sitting here for another month, but we can do it."

"There's no reason for me to stay!"

"Nobody's leaving until the job's done," Optimus said.

"Yeah? *Stop* me," Astrotrain said, and started to transform.

Optimus tossed a grappling hook into the middle of his transform sequence so it locked right into his frame even as Astrotrain took off. Optimus got a good hold, braced himself, and yanked at just the right angle so when Astrotrain fired his thrusters, it changed the angle of flight and sent him flying directly into the roaring band of turbulence below the station.

"Yeaarrgh! Get me out of here!" Astrotrain howled, being whipped around too violently by the storm currents to right himself.

Optimus gave him a couple of educational minutes of the experience—none of the other Decepticons made a move to try and help—and then he hauled Astrotrain back to the station hand-over-hand. By the time he was done reeling him in, the rest of the Decepticons had drawn back somewhat warily, and Astrotrain was sprawled out exhaustedly on the ground at his feet.

"Well, you asked for it," Optimus said. "It's still up to you, by the way."

"*What* is?" Astrotrain groaned faintly.

"Whether you're going to help, or we're all going to be here for a month," Optimus said.

At first it looked like it would be longer than that. For the next four days, Astrotrain and all the rest of the Decepticons did nothing but sulk. Optimus didn't force any of them to do any work, even when first a handful and then all of them just ignored his orders, so nothing whatsoever got done. Optimus could have programmed the drones himself and gotten things moving, but he didn't.

"I'm afraid Megatron's going to be quite disappointed with your work, Optimus," Starscream said to him silkily in the mess hall, three days later, with all the others sullenly listening in. "Right now I'm projecting we won't be finished *indefinitely*."

Optimus shrugged. "I don't really have anywhere better to be. All my friends are still in jail."

The whole group tried to make a break for it that evening, which Optimus prevented before the fact by the simple expedient of removing a few necessary components from all the shuttle nav systems.

"Are you insane?" Starscream shrieked, when he and the others came charging back into the mess hall and saw the tidy pile of the components sitting in the middle of the table. "Those can only be

replaced in a parallax vacuum chamber! Now we're all *stuck* here."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure Megatron will send another shuttle for us," Optimus said. "Once the turbines are up and running. Until then, I guess we *are* all stuck here. Together." He tipped up the cube he was drinking from and polished it off. He stood and added, "Hope none of you have critical energon requirements. My reactor puts out forty terajoules a minute, so I'm all right for a century or so." The Decepticons all looked at each other and then stared at him. "Have a good recharge cycle." Optimus nodded to them all before heading to the small chamber he'd taken as a makeshift office.

The next morning, when Optimus once again said to Vortex, as he had each morning so far, "Please get these drones programmed to carry the large turbine," Vortex didn't just nod smirking and then ignore him, he hissed, "That's *stupid*. We should start with the *satellite* turbines! Once they're in place, their stabilizer fields will *overlap* and create a well of stability that will speed up the installation of the larger turbines by an order of magnitude!"

"Which one would you recommend starting with?" Optimus asked.

Vortex gestured at the third drone from the left. "The one that's going into the lowest pressure current, obviously!"

Optimus nodded. "All right, go ahead with that one, then."

He walked away, and Vortex *did* actually get the drones programmed to install the turbine he'd picked. It took the rest of the day, but by the time the next rest cycle rolled around, it was in place. "There," Vortex sneered, standing over Optimus's solitary table in the mess. "See how the turbulence is already diminished around it? How did you even think it I would be better to install them the other way around? It's like your turbulence analysis routines are corrupted."

"I don't have turbulence analysis routines," Optimus said mildly. "I'm a *truck*."

Vortex stared at him in outrage. "Why are you even on this assignment?"

"I think I annoyed Megatron," Optimus said, which was both truthful and misleading. "I think *all* of you have, for that matter. Do you really think he doesn't know about your little club? Or that it's a coincidence he sent me here?"

Vortex drew back, eyeing him, suddenly uneasy. "It's *Starscream's* little club," he blurted.

Optimus shrugged. "You can explain that to him when we get back. I'm sure he'll be very understanding. Thanks for getting that turbine in," he added. "It was a good job. I'm glad you *do* have excellent turbulence analysis routines. Can you generate an optimal order for installing the rest of the turbines?"

"Yes?" Vortex said very warily, as if that was a trick question of some kind, and didn't respond to the compliment at all in any way except for twitching slightly and looking even more uneasy. Decepticons didn't seem to believe in positive reinforcement.

Another two turbines went in the next day as Ramjet and Dirge, who'd been stuck out there the longest, also started helping. The day after that, about half of the Decepticons were doing at least *some* grudging work, and halfway through the day Optimus had to break up a fight between Vortex and Dirge arguing over which turbine to install next. They were about to start *shooting* when he got there, pulled them apart, and asked, "What's the problem?"

They both started to snarl out their reasoning over each other—all the other Decepticons had

assembled to watch, making no effort to intervene, including Starscream—and after they both hissed back and forth for several moments, Optimus held up a hand to stop them. “All right, but why are you fighting about it? The time difference that each of you is projecting is only an hour at best. You’ve been arguing for forty-six minutes already. In another fourteen minutes you’ll have lost any possible gain.”

Both of them paused and frowned, along with most of the onlookers. Optimus gave it a moment to sink in and then added, “On the other hand, I don’t see any reason we can’t try them both.” He turned to the others. “Everyone on this side, start working on Vortex’s choice. Everyone else, on Dirge’s.”

He’d mostly just wanted to give them both a graceful way out, but apparently putting them in teams triggered some kind of competition subroutine: all the Decepticons instantly decided their team *had to win*, and their efficiency jumped by three orders of magnitude. It was somewhat bemusing—and even a little alarming—to watch them going at it. They got a day’s worth of work done in under thirty astrominutes. And then nearly destroyed all of it by trying to also sabotage each other group’s work, but fortunately Optimus had been watching out for that kind of thing—although he’d actually expected the attempt to come from Starscream, who along with Astrotrain still hadn’t gotten on board—and caught them before they managed to actually carry it out.

He ignored the instantly offered excuses, and since he was starting to get the idea, he also didn’t try to argue them into looking at the bigger picture. He just said, “If you can’t get it done quicker without slowing the other team down, you’re better off if they win. Then you can identify what they did that worked better, and integrate an improvement over *that* into your strategy for the *next* round.”

He could see that the Decepticons were all skeptical of that idea, but he was also physically blocking them from wrecking each other’s efforts, so they grudgingly fell back on it for lack of a better option. Optimus watched them go off and sighed a little, tolerantly, and then turned and found Starscream there watching, his face gone utterly still. “Was there something you wanted, Starscream?” Optimus said.

“You’re really *doing* this,” Starscream said flatly.

Optimus paused. But he wasn’t going to lie, after all. “Yes, Starscream,” he said. “I’m really doing this.”

“You’re *helping* Megatron,” Starscream said. “You’re deliberately—he’s your *enemy*! Your worst enemy in the universe! You *hate* him!”

It was a very strange sensation to realize—that Starscream was wrong. “I *don’t* hate Megatron,” Optimus said slowly, feeling as if he were telling himself as much as Starscream, a revelation. Of course he hadn’t ever hated the Decepticons in the sense of actively wanting to destroy them or make them suffer. But...he *had* seen them as the monsters Megatron had named them, savage and vicious. He had never been able to imagine that *love* could coexist with their violence. But it did. He was *here* because it did—because *Megatron* loved, loved his people, his monsters, and wanted to save them so badly that he’d let Optimus come up here and try what he thought was a pointless and stupid attempt, on the sliver of a chance that maybe it would work. “I don’t hate *any* of you,” Optimus added, almost blankly. “I only ever wanted to stop you from hurting others.”

“And now you think you *can*,” Starscream said. “By—making yourself useful? And that’s all it takes to make you *open your ports* for Megatron?” He sounded savagely angry, his fists clenched at his sides, a portrait of total rage.

Optimus stared at him in rising wonder. He felt as though his emotional system was building out an entirely new subprocessor unit. “Starscream—do *you* hate Megatron?”

“What?” Starscream snapped.

“You’ve tried to overthrow him many times,” Optimus said. “I know you want to prove that you’re better than him. But do you hate him? Do you truly want to see him permanently deactivated? Destroyed? Would that actually give you pleasure?” Starscream wasn’t answering, his expressive face gone oddly frozen, and Optimus could have smiled at him, if only he hadn’t, by now, vividly understood that doing so would have wounded him worse than a rifle blast to the head. “Because you’re wrong, actually,” he added instead.

“About what?”

“About why Megatron hasn’t killed you,” Optimus said. Starscream stared at him. “He doesn’t *want* to. He thinks you’re going to *force* him to kill you. And he hates the idea.”

Starscream’s optics were pulsating virulently. “He’s *confided* in you on the subject, I suppose?” he hissed.

“Only to tell me that he thinks you’re worth more than me and every single Autobot alive put together,” Optimus said, gently.

Starscream flinched back from him, involuntarily. He stood trembling for a moment and then said harshly, “Do you think I *care*?” and then whirled and fled unceremoniously down the corridor before Optimus could say another word.

#

Ultra Magnus looked at Laserbeak on Optimus’s shoulder—Optimus had made sure to go pick him up before going to see Ultra Magnus in his new Darkmount quarters—and then back at him in visible frustration: he clearly wanted to ask what the hell was going on. Instead he said, “Megatron’s had me working on a planetary defense strategy,” in a tone of urgent questioning: *should I be doing this?*

Optimus just nodded. “What do you think of his ideas?”

After a visible struggle, Ultra Magnus reluctantly said, “Well, it’s not like Megatron doesn’t know what he’s doing when it comes to invading planets,” instead of saying anything more complimentary. “Although... Optimus, have *you* ever considered...” He trailed off until Optimus nudged him with an inquiring tilt of his head. “Have you ever considered the possibility the Quintessons might try to return?”

“I can’t say I have,” Optimus said slowly. “Is...*that* what Megatron wants a defense system against?”

Magnus grimaced. “He doesn’t just want one. He’s already *got* one. Looks like...” He glanced at Laserbeak and then gave a frustrated shrug and kept going. “Looks like he put the start of it up probably around the time he took Polyhex, and just kept expanding it from there.”

“What?” Optimus said, surprised all over again. “He had a functional planetary defense up during the entire war?”

“Yeah,” Magnus said. “It’s independently powered with isolated microreactors the whole length. They produce at least thirty thousand astroliters of energon a year. If he’d just diverted the power

for a month, he'd have had us five million years ago. And it looks like he's putting roughly three-quarters of their current energy output into it. More, since you got those turbines going on Jupiter."

Optimus sat with it in silence a moment. It wasn't, by now, wholly unexpected, but it was... another big missing piece of a puzzle he'd been looking at all wrong, for eons. A planetary defense network, legions of warriors being built and crammed into stasis... yes. It was part of the same thing. Megatron *cared*. He'd cared all along. Just—about something Optimus hadn't even thought about. "The whole war," Optimus said slowly, "Megatron's *first* priority was...defending all of Cybertron? Even above... defeating *us*." Just as his own priority had been—protecting the lives of innocents. Even above defeating Megatron.

Ultra Magnus gave an instinctive flinch of protest at the suggestion, but he clearly couldn't argue. "I don't know for sure that's what it's meant for," was the best he could manage, and when Optimus tilted his head inquiringly, he gave up. "But it looks like it. The programming is deliberately designed *not* to be set off by any Cybertronians. And it's got serious firepower: that array could have taken out Omega Supreme without a hitch. I don't know why he *didn't* use it to target us."

"Don't you?" Optimus said gently.

Ultra Magnus frowned. "We'd have gone after it if we'd ever learned it was there, obviously, but even so..." he trailed off, and looked at Laserbeak in frustration once more.

#

"Are you really worried about the Quintessons coming back?" Optimus asked Megatron, after climbing up to his quarters.

Megatron gave him a disgusted look over the top of his console. "Is your logic unit incapable of identifying any threat unless it's actively shooting at you?"

"Actually, my logic unit was operating on the assumption that if the Quintessons were going to come back, they'd have done it some time in the last eight million years," Optimus said. "It didn't occur to me that there was anything up there to *stop* them."

"It didn't occur to *me* that you wouldn't have had any defense systems of your own in place," Megatron said, with even more disgust. "I assumed that most of them were deactivated once I bombed Iacon, but Ultra Magnus seemed astonished that I'd bothered to take any precautions."

Optimus said slowly, a memory surfacing, "You held off bombing Iacon for nearly forty thousand years longer than we expected. Is that—*why*? You were building up your network to *compensate* for what you thought we were doing?"

"I'd say that was obvious, but it's growing painfully clear to me that it *wasn't*," Megatron said. "You may have some sort of genius for persuading idiots to collaborate effectively, but you're nearly incompetent as a general." His optics suddenly narrowed. "Tell me something, that time you withdrew from Sorinolis—*was* that a feint to lure us into a strike on your withdrawal so you could hit us with a hidden force in the Marinus Holds?"

Optimus, still processing, tried to remember the incident, then realized he didn't have to. "No. I've never tried to run a feint against you at all."

Megatron audibly ground his jaw servos. "Do you know, I could have won this war in half the time if I'd just assumed you were a military idiot."

“You’d also have beaten us a lot sooner if your soldiers didn’t spend more than half their time and energy squabbling with each other, not to mention *you*,” Optimus said dryly.

“Don’t remind me,” Megatron growled.

“It’s not an *accident*,” Optimus said, with increasing certainty. “You’re the leader the Decepticons needed. I’m the leader the Autobots needed. But neither of us is everything *Cybertron* needed, because Cybertron—is all of us. Autobots and Decepticons. Together, just as you said.”

Megatron’s optics flashed. “Don’t get any ideas, Optimus,” he said silkily. “I didn’t spend eight million years winning this war just to hand power right back to you.”

“You’re using your power to restore our homeworld, reintegrate our society, and protect us from invasion,” Optimus said. “Keep it as long as you like.” He didn’t bother keeping the amusement out of his voice. Of course Megatron wanted to interpret his statement as some kind of maneuver; that would allow him to continue comfortably treating Optimus like an opponent, instead of having to face the hideous prospect of sincere peaceful collaboration. “Would you let me bring some Autobots out of stasis? Younger ones like your new soldiers, who didn’t have much time in the war.”

Megatron’s irritation had been mounting visibly, but at Optimus’s shift of subject he paused and snorted. “Not until the situation with Starscream and Elita-One is resolved. *I’m* not a military idiot.”

Optimus sighed. “It would be much easier to *resolve the situation* if the population was shifted away from veterans. If Elita’s forces were outnumbered a hundred to one by *Autobots* choosing to cooperate with you, she wouldn’t launch an attack. She’d wait until you did something unacceptable that made them join her. All you need to do is avoid doing that.”

Megatron folded his arms over his chest. “And when I *can’t* avoid doing something you leaky fuel pumps find *unacceptable*, I’ll be left in a substantially worse strategic position. Which means that the second I start letting any significant number of Autobots out of stasis, Starscream will immediately launch a full-scale uprising that more than half of the Decepticons will join, since they’re also not military idiots, and they’ll all *notice* that I’m giving away the victory they spent eight million years winning.”

He said it with a kind of taunting satisfaction, but Optimus ignored his tone. The bigger issue was that Megatron was clearly right about what the Decepticons would do. “We still need to do *something*, though,” he murmured, processing. “The current situation still isn’t stable. We’ll tip one way or the other...”

“Yes,” Megatron said pointedly. “We *will*. As I already told you. You haven’t actually accomplished anything in the last month except getting those turbines going, which I’d thank you for, except you also managed to tie Starscream’s emotional circuitry in knots while you were at it. I halfway thought he’d start taking potshots at me in the command center. What the hell did you do to him, anyway?”

“I told him that you loved him,” Optimus said. Megatron gaped at him, knocked completely speechless. “Not in those exact words. But he understood what you meant.”

“What *I* meant?” Megatron said, voice rising.

“Isn’t that what you meant?” Optimus said mildly. “I thought it was.”

“What do you *think* about my ripping your cranial unit off?” Megatron said threateningly.

“I take it things went well with Ultra Magnus?” Optimus said, ignoring the fury, which his emotional unit now had absolutely no problem identifying as Megatron being violently embarrassed at the possibility of anyone recognizing he so much as had the processing capacity for affection, much less that he was using it for anything.

“He’s been performing adequately,” Megatron said, obviously trying to find a way to turn that into a threat and failing. “Because he’s *being deceived*. As soon as he finds out this *isn’t* some scheme of yours to overthrow me, he’ll probably sabotage the entire system. Unless that’s what this *is*,” Megatron added, a cold suspicious glint brightening in his optics.

“You just got done complaining that you’ve spent the war giving me too much credit,” Optimus said. “Stop worrying about me coming up with some elaborate scheme to stop you from making the peace that’s all I’ve wanted for eight million years. What I *do* want to come up with is some way to bring all the people we love *with* us.”

Megatron bristled with the desire to challenge his language, but Optimus fixed him with a steady look, fully prepared to stand his ground, and wasn’t a bit surprised when Megatron chickened out and swerved completely away from it, actually dropping his gaze to the console for a moment and pretending that some high-priority alert had just come in. What did surprise Optimus was the involuntary flicker of emotion that followed in his own processor, too quick for him to fully name: something beyond amusement, and more than just the satisfaction of having gotten something right.

He didn’t chase it down in his diagnostics; he wasn’t sure he *did* want to name it. *I don’t hate Megatron*, he’d told Starscream, and he’d meant it, but—there were eight million years of agony to cross from there, and he wasn’t ready to cross them in a day.

Which was of course the problem—because no one else was, either. He rubbed his faceplate, trying to think. “The possibility *is* there,” he said. “I’m sure of it now, even more. Aren’t you?” he added to Megatron. “You *have* been able to work with Magnus. The Decepticons on Jupiter *did* work with me.”

“In both cases, in a highly constrained and involuntary situation that none of them would have tolerated for as long as an astrosecond otherwise,” Megatron said. “No, I’m not sure of it at all. Right this minute, Starscream’s off somewhere plotting my death—and yours—with half the mechs who were up there ‘working’ with you. And the instant Ultra Magnus learns that you don’t have a secret plan to kill me, he’ll drop the defense project and run off to join Elita-One and do the same thing, only instead of killing you, they’ll want to lock you up somewhere and talk to you earnestly about your poor judgement for a few thousand years until you come around. Personally, I’d prefer Starscream’s plans for me.”

Megatron gave him a hard look, daring him to dispute any of it, and Optimus grimaced: now it was his turn to drop his gaze. He couldn’t actually disagree. They *were* still too far apart, divided by a chasm millions of years in the making. He viscerally felt the chance of bridging the distance, but it was like seeing some glimmering fragile spark on the other side, easily dismissed as a mirage.

Megatron nodded in response to his silence. “As far as I’m concerned, all that this brilliant exchange of yours accomplished was a brief delay in the inevitable. The fringes have to be cleared out, or the center can’t hold. There isn’t some miracle coming to spare you from the necessity.”

Optimus raised his head again, feeling his optics light as the words sparked a sudden bright flare of an idea. “What if there *could* be?”

“Back to claiming divine powers, *Prime*?” Megatron said coldly.

“Just the one that actually works,” Optimus said. “Let’s go talk to Primus. Together.”

Megatron stared at him. “No.”

“Listen to me,” Optimus began, but Megatron just shook his head in vivid exasperation.

“*No*. What possible reason would I have for going with you to visit some revolving holoshow booth that once anointed you ruler of Cybertron? Either this thing you call Primus would change its mind and acknowledge me as the *actual* ruler, in which case I don’t care, or it wouldn’t, in which case I also don’t care. There’s literally no point in my going.”

“We wouldn’t be going for *authority*,” Optimus said. “We’d be going for *advice*. And we’d take Starscream and Magnus with us. If nothing else, it would keep them both out of trouble while we were gone—”

“*More* delaying tactics.”

“I managed to delay your winning the war for eight million years,” Optimus said, wryly. “I’ll take delaying this *necessity* of yours for that long.”

Megatron straightened up from the console and turned away from him to go to the balcony, looking out over Polyhex with his arms folded over his chest. But Optimus took a step after him, cautiously on the edge of reaching out. The idea had taken a sure hold of him, the same certainty he’d felt before—that this was a step forward—a small one perhaps, but at least another handspan of bridge they could build out from either end of their divide. “All we need is time,” he said urgently. “Primus could help us get just that. Surely it’s worth a try?” If Megatron would just see that—as surely he *wanted* to see it—

But when Megatron turned around, his face was hard and implacable. “I’ll make you an offer, Optimus, since you’re so sure of this scheme of yours,” and all of Optimus’s servos tightened at the sound of his voice, low and cool and deadly deliberate. “I’ll do it—I’ll come down to *Primus* with you. But this will be the last of the *delays*. When we get to this Hall of Primes, and nothing significantly helpful occurs, you’ll accept the reality of the situation. And then—you’ll help me stage a final confrontation. Elita on one side, Starscream on the other, and both of us in the center. If we’re lucky, they’ll largely take each other’s groups out, and everyone else will fall in line behind us. Which we need them to, because we don’t *have* eight million years. I give it a century at most before the Quintessons hit us.”

Optimus locked into stillness. “Are you saying,” he managed, forcing it through his vocal unit, “the defense system—it isn’t purely a safeguard? Have—have there been actual Quintesson attacks?”

Megatron shut his optics off for a moment as if he was in pain. “Of course not. Do you think *they’re* idiots?”

“Yet you assume they’re planning to come back?”

Megatron made a short gesture of his hand in the direction of the sky. “At slightly random intervals over the course of the war, something has hit the defense system. It always looks like something natural, each time—a meteorite shower, a space wind, something of the sort—but each one probes the system’s limitations, and gets something small and fragmentary past the net and close enough to the surface to pick up some data. We’ve had to strike a balance between destroying the spy

devices and letting them know that we're onto them."

Optimus stared at him in horror. "But—why—why would they have waited all this time?" he whispered.

"Why wouldn't they wait?" Megatron said impatiently. "At the going rate for sentient cybernetic slaves, they'd make twenty quintillion galactic credits a year off selling us, with no risk to their own skins. They're cowardly swollen parasites, they can't get that kind of power and wealth any other way. I imagine they just put themselves into stasis and pop out of it every once in a while to see if we're vulnerable again, and if not, they go back down."

"But then—why would they come now?" Optimus said. "You've still got the defense system up—you've put *more* power into it—"

"Grrrh, isn't it obvious, you backfiring moron?" Megatron growled. "They've been waiting for *the end of the war*. If we'd killed each other off entirely—or, apparently, if *you'd* won," he added, acidly, "the planetary defense system would have collapsed soon after—in which case they could simply glide back in and start the factories back up, with no one left to stop them. Even if they didn't get that lucky, they were still better off waiting until the end, to let the loser do as much damage to the winner as possible. But once they confirm that the war is over for good—then that's the weakest we're ever going to be. From then on, the longer they wait, the more it's going to cost them. So at some point in the not-distant future, they'll make their move. And if we're not ready, they'll *win*. So it's time to decide, *Prime*," he finished, mockingly. "Just how much faith *do* you have in our *creator* and his wisdom? Enough to put your beloved Elita on the altar with your own hands?"

Optimus shuddered in misery, turning away, his intakes struggling to pull in air. He expected cruelty from Megatron. But what made it fresh and vivid and infinitely more terrible now was his new understanding that Megatron was cruel only *with cause*. And the even worse possibility that he might not be *wrong* about the cause. Optimus had been unable to imagine making Megatron's terrible bargain; he would never have willingly sacrificed Elita, or for that matter any other Autobot, even to secure the peace he longed for. But to save their entire species from being *enslaved by the Quintessons* again— If Megatron was right, if *that* was the choice—

And Megatron was so sure, so certain, that he had deliberately endured five million years more of *their war* in order to preserve the defenses of Cybertron. As if he'd been fighting for all of them, all along. Optimus put his hand over his face. "Megatron," he said, raw and distorted. "Are you—*sure*? You *must* have doubts. It's been so long. Sentinel Prime overthrew them eons ago, and the civil war— You haven't actually seen them, you said so yourself. Do you *truly* believe—that they will come back? Please, tell me, honestly—" He stopped.

Megatron was silent a long moment. When he spoke again, the taunting note was entirely gone. And it had never before occurred to Optimus that Megatron's viciousness, his mockery, might in some way have been a kindness. But it was so much worse—so very much worse—when he said simply, not unkind at all, "Yes, Optimus. They're coming."

"How can you be sure?" Optimus whispered.

"Because it's what I would do," Megatron said, a gentle, implacable death-knell. It was what he *had* done. He had patiently, steadily clawed away at his enemies for eight million years, until the right moment came to secure victory. He hadn't faltered. His goals hadn't changed. His determination hadn't wavered.

Optimus gasped once, in a bitter flash of pain. "Yes," he said, forcing the words out. "Come with

me to Primus. And if he cannot guide us to another way, then—then I will—” He couldn’t finish. A sob broke from his vocal unit instead.

Megatron heaved a deep sigh. “I don’t know whether to believe you,” he said after a moment. “But I suppose it’s worth the travel time to find out. We leave in an hour. Get Magnus and meet me at the lift.”

He began to leave—and then he paused and put a hand on Optimus’s shoulder, very briefly, a rough gesture of solidarity that hurt worse than any wound Megatron had ever given him. Then he let go and swept out. Alone, still feeling the weight of Megatron’s hand, of the terrible promise he’d given, Optimus shuddered one more time, and then he went for Laserbeak, to go and speak to Ultra Magnus.

#

The journey down to the core was far more difficult than it had been eight million years before. But Optimus barely noticed. He moved through the tunnels mechanically, running on automatic routines and one thin remaining sliver of hope. Ultra Magnus, beside him, was all but physically radiating a desperate urgency to speak to him, but Megatron was right behind them, Starscream trudging along deep in a bitter sulk on his heels. It stifled Magnus for some time, but when they reached the Excelsius Shaft, they had to go down one at a time, and Megatron sent Starscream first, then the two of them, and when Optimus reached the bottom, Starscream had stalked away down the next sloping tunnel just far enough away to vanish into the dark. Ultra Magnus caught him by the arm and said urgently, “Optimus, I need to know—”

Optimus put his hand on Magnus’s, trying to stop him from asking for the agony Optimus didn’t want to share. As soon as Magnus knew, he too would have to face the same bitter choice. Optimus already knew that Elita would not change her position: she would only see Megatron lying to him, finding another lever to move him. But Ultra Magnus...he’d seen the defense system for himself. He’d been working with Megatron for weeks now. That might be enough to make a difference for him—and yet Optimus couldn’t even bear to hope for any of that. It was too terrible a thing to *hope* for, that Ultra Magnus would help him *fight* Elita—

Ultra Magnus paused, but only for a moment. “Optimus,” he said, his voice thrumming with tension, “for Cybertron’s sake, please tell me we’re not down here because you want to persuade Primus to name Megatron the Prime in your place.”

Optimus blinked at him, startled. “What?”

“You thought Primus might name *me*, once,” Magnus said. “I know you’ve doubted yourself, I know you think you’ve failed. But Optimus—you can’t imagine that Primus would ever anoint *Megatron* as the Prime—”

“No,” Optimus said slowly. The Matrix pulsed in his chest, and he felt, oddly, less doubt that it belonged there than he ever had before. “No. I don’t. I am only...” his voice wavered, “hoping that he will shine a light in the darkness for us. Because I...cannot see a way out.” Ultra Magnus was looking at him frowning, and Optimus couldn’t keep it back from him. “Magnus—the defense system is not a precaution. Megatron believes—he is certain—that the Quintessons are *coming back*.”

Magnus straightened, an instant wave of denial coming across his face, easy for Optimus to read, and just as easy for him to see it go. “They’ve been waiting for the end of the war?” he whispered, recognizing it even more quickly than Optimus himself had. “All this time, they’ve been *waiting*—oh, *Primus*.” He put a hand up over his face.

“We *need* Megatron, Magnus,” Optimus said, grieving. “Him, and the Decepticons—we’ve needed them all along. And they need us. The peace *must* be preserved—”

He half expected Magnus to argue, to protest. But Magnus said instead, hoarsely, “Oh, Primus, what have I done,” and Optimus froze. “Elita sent word through Arcee. She said—Optimus, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. She said Megatron had broken you with his hold over Earth. She—”

“What *have* you done?” Optimus said, in rising alarm, and Ultra Magnus turned as Megatron came down the shaft and emerged into the corridor. Optimus caught the glint of light on moving steel in the dark behind him, just in time to shout a warning and lunge forward, trying to push Megatron out of the way of the shot.

Megatron reacted instantly, whirling to one side already leveling his cannon towards the threat behind him, but no shot came after all; instead Optimus heard the rumble of explosives directly over his head, up inside the shaft. He had a moment to look up and see the wave of liquefying slag come roaring down the shaft towards him before he was being tackled bodily aside, Megatron rolling them together over and away as the steaming metal poured out in a torrent where he’d just been standing.

They clanged to a halt against the wall, and Megatron sprang up to his feet just as Elita emerged from the darkness, a heavy externally-powered electro railgun leveled, with Chromia, Moonracer, and Firestar behind her. “The hard way, then,” she said, grimly, heaving the gun up, and Optimus scrambled to his feet.

“Elita, *no*,” he said, urgently. “Listen to me, please—” stepping out towards them, getting between her and Megatron, but as he did, a blast took him in the chest, knocking him sideways—and it hadn’t come from Elita. She and her squad were all holding their fire, her optics going wide in dismay as the painful crackle of null rays went coruscating over his armor. Optimus staggered heavily, his left leg gone temporarily numb, half falling into Megatron’s arms as Starscream reemerged from the dark—with Astrotrain and Blitzwing and Vortex now flanking him.

The null ray’s effect was fading—the shot had certainly been intended to disable Megatron’s cannon; even at full power, it couldn’t fully penetrate Optimus’s armor—and Megatron heaved Optimus back onto his feet. “Well, well, how impatient of you all. I’m sorry, Optimus. I don’t think we’ll be making it to Primus after all,” he said, sardonic, and shrugged his shoulder lightly: his fusion cannon was powering up with a faint climbing whine, lights going to the edge. Starscream and his followers all looked alarmed, but their faces were set; they started to fan out, and across from them, Elita and her squad were doing the same. Ultra Magnus was standing to the side, hesitating, on the verge of moving to join Elita.

“Optimus,” Elita said, calling, a hand outstretched. “*Optimus!*” She was asking him to come to them as well: the final choice already here before him, and utterly stark. He could go to her—and the Autobots would live. But *Megatron* would die, because everyone else in this tunnel wanted him dead. And the only way to save Megatron, and his peace with him—was for Optimus to stand with him. For the two of them to take on everyone else: Elita, and Ultra Magnus, and poor furious Starscream, and all their allies—making the choice to trade all their lives for peace, as if that bargain could ever lead to hope instead of despair.

“No,” Optimus said in helpless protest, looking around at all of them: none of them listening, weapons ready in the dark to destroy one another, destroy peace, the fragile lost world slipping back away into the endless night of war, and he couldn’t see anything else to do, so he turned to Megatron, put his hand on the barrel of the cannon, and said in pure desperation, “You promised.”

“What options are *you* seeing?” Megatron snapped with a jerk of his head towards the others,

outrage bright in his optics.

“I don’t know,” Optimus said; he had nothing in mind at all, couldn’t see any way out; he had only the agonizing certainty that this *wasn’t* one. “*Please—*”

Megatron made a gesture of violent frustration and snarled, “Of *course* you don’t.” He shoved Optimus aside and aimed his cannon at the ceiling. “All right, all of you idiots back off and put your combat systems in standby mode, or I’ll bring the whole damned overlayer down on all our heads.”

“You’ll bring it down on your *own* head while you’re at it!” Starscream said.

“That’s right, Starscream,” Megatron said. “Do you want to take odds on who’s going to dig out first?”

Starscream very clearly *didn’t*; he darted an alarmed look at the ceiling—it wasn’t looking particularly stable anyway after the torrent of slag that had just come pouring down—and didn’t make a move.

Megatron swept an imperious look around at everyone else and said coldly, “I made a deal with Optimus that we’d go to the Hall of Primes, so that’s what we’re doing—*all* of us. And then I’ll give every one of you as much fight as you can stand immediately afterwards. If that’s not good enough, you can spend the next decade trying to get out from under a hundred thousand tons of durasteel and liquicrete. *Choose now.*”

Optimus could have wept, or possibly kissed him, his intakes going through a shuddering cycle even as he took the chance and turned towards Elita, urgently. She was staring at Megatron, visibly taken aback, and when Optimus said, “Elita, please. Come with us. Come and hear Primus’s voice with us. It is—it *must be*—worth trying to find another way. A way to *peace*.” She looked over at him, hesitant—

“You are my Prime,” Ultra Magnus said abruptly, across from him, and he hefted up his own rifle and aimed it at the ceiling also. “If Megatron has to pull the trigger, I’m firing too.”

#

Optimus was so shaky with relief that he had to make an effort not to put out a hand and lean heavily against the wall of the passageway as they collectively resumed progress. He wouldn’t actually have stopped right now for all the energon on Cybertron, but his system would gladly have taken an hour to simply sit in the dark with his head in his hands, taking deep breaths and letting his reality matrix settle. He still couldn’t entirely believe it had happened. He hadn’t seen any way out: threatening to bury and possibly kill them all en masse hadn’t been a possibility on his own radar. And Megatron, who had seen it—hadn’t *wanted* a way out.

Even as the thought crossed his mind, a sudden possibility occurred to Optimus belatedly. He sent a quick long-range ping, on the comm frequency he’d assigned to the perimeter patrols—and got a response *back*, at the very limit, confirming the suspicion he’d formed. There were *other Decepticons* behind them. Very likely his own fivesquad, and some of the others he’d trained for the perimeter patrols; Decepticons who wouldn’t have batted an eye at shooting Starscream as well as Elita. Megatron had been *expecting* the attack. In fact, he’d probably been counting on it, as an opportunity to pressure Optimus into taking that necessary stand.

Which made it all the more astonishing that he’d *given up the chance*—just for the asking. Optimus looked over at him in fresh gratitude, wanting to say something—but Megatron was

frowning down at the walls and the floor—they were into the ancient Primal Path by now, the central passageway that led directly to the Hall of Primes, and every surface was beautifully ornamented with bas-reliefs and embossed markings all over them, elaborate etchings of hard-angled symbols and jagged lines. “Were these here last time?” he demanded, clanking a knuckle against one of the walls.

“Yes,” Optimus said, a quick confirmation. He’d saved almost all of the experience carefully in archival memory. “Alpha Trion believed they are written in an ancient language from the early days of Cybertron, one we’ve lost. We don’t know what they mean.”

“Not those! *Those*,” Megatron said, tapping the wall again. “They don’t mean anything: they’re clawmarks. And whatever made them, there were a lot of them down here.”

Optimus looked at the walls again in surprise, and realized he’d been looking at the ancient etchings, while Megatron was looking at the deeply graven scratches marring them. And he was clearly right about those: the variable depth of the marks, their random placement, which haphazardly interrupted the long etched phrases beneath. Optimus looked down: the floors were marked similarly, as if some horde of creatures with claws that could scratch durasteel and electrum had come swarming through here.

“The warrior we found down here,” he said slowly. “The one I told you we believed was Esperan Prime. His armor was damaged in the same way—”

Megatron nodded, and then he reached out and casually ripped off a chunk of wall paneling—Optimus twitched instinctively—and studied it more closely as they walked, tilting it to examine the depth of the marks. “These wouldn’t be able to penetrate modern armor. That’s something, I suppose. Although we can’t assume that they haven’t been iterating...” His voice was low; he was half speaking to himself. Optimus could faintly pick up the radiation patterns from his head showing the intense analytical activity going on in his strategy unit.

It fed his desperate hope, already given a little nourishment. Megatron *had* answered his plea, and Ultra Magnus had followed; if *they* had been able to reach across the divide, surely—surely Primus’s voice would be able to persuade the others. Elita was walking up ahead with Ultra Magnus: Optimus caught dim glimpses of the two of them speaking as they passed the glowing violet junction lights, brief strobelike moments of hope, because she was listening, and though she was still frowning, her face was concerned as well. Even if Starscream refused to listen, but *Elita* listened, then Starscream would still hesitate to start an uprising just from caution, perhaps just long enough—

“Well? Now what, fearless leader?” Starscream said from his position in the lead, breaking into the train of thought, and Optimus looked up to see him stopping at the edge of the precipice: they had reached the abyssal pit of the Equatorial Passage, which went falling away endlessly in either direction, the interior bristling and pierced with the half-shattered ruins of ancient towers that had once surely been full of life. In the center, the immense sphere of the Hall of Primes hung suspended by a sprawling interconnected web of supports, the doors standing opposite them across the chasm.

Optimus drew a deep breath and stepped forward to the drawbridge unit on the side, and entered the ancient access code that Alpha Trion had worked out, last time, with more than six days of trial and error. But a faint error beeped when Optimus put it in: not a message, only a brief pattern of three red flickers on the console. “It’s out of power,” Ultra Magnus said. “That’s a standard pattern used in the deep levels.”

Optimus paused, frowning, and Megatron sighed. “Carry the Autobots over,” he ordered.

Starscream turned, optics narrow. “I don’t think—”

“That’s abundantly clear,” Megatron sneered. “Allow me to rephrase. On the assumption that you don’t want to be immediately incinerated and dumped into this passage to see which end your scorched hulk floats out of, *carry them over*. And if you drop them, I’ll shoot you right after,” he added, and held his own arm out to Optimus.

It was a squeeze for all of them to stand on the narrow platform on the other side, in front of the doors. Those weren’t sealed up anymore, but they responded to the code only with the same red flicker as the bridge controls. Megatron emitted another deep sigh and told Ultra Magnus, “Take the one on the left,” and together the two of them dragged the doors apart, slow and grindingly, and let them all into the vast chamber beyond, darkened into pitch.

The last time Optimus had entered the chamber, that darkness had immediately begun to lighten, the glimmering of electricity flowing into ancient circuitry, diodes coming alive. Now—nothing happened. The dark remained unrelieved. Optimus called, his voice shaking, “Primus? Primus! Do you hear us?”

There was no answer. His fuel pump cycled once, twice, a dozen times. Then Firestar fired up a long-life flare to hang brilliant above their heads, shining golden radiance over the beautiful vault—over the massive sphere of Primus’s brain gleaming suspended in the heart of it, chips of corundum reflecting the light in a hundred crystalline shades, the ancient patterns glittering, glittering—and dead. Optimus heard his own ventilation running in clicking, distorted cycles. Then Magnus said, sounding sick, “The battle of Mirillion—when the fuel lines for the ring reactors got taken out—” and Optimus couldn’t hold in a raw, choked sob: they had killed their own creator, and they hadn’t even realized.

“If he’s only in stasis,” Chromia said, low, “and we restore power...” Her voice trailed off as she looked over at Megatron. The only power on Cybertron right now was coming from the Decepticon reactors. Optimus turned to look at Megatron in desperation, but the answer was already written on his face. Megatron was glancing around the space, and there *was* regret in him, a touch of curiosity—but it wasn’t anguish. Megatron was sorry that there was nothing left here. But it wouldn’t make him change his course. He wouldn’t divert the tides of Decepticon power to try and restore Primus to life. Not when the Quintessons were coming.

“As if it’s worth wasting power on this relic, besides the time we’ve *already* wasted,” Starscream sneered—another reason Megatron *couldn’t*, even if he’d wanted to—and he reached out with his foot to nudge with deliberate disdain at the massive scarred body of Esperan Prime still resting against the base of the pillar with the small unarmored mech cradled in his arms. Last time, Optimus and the others had left the pair there untouched, in honor, hoping to one day return when they were able to give them a proper resting place.

Ultra Magnus drew an angry short intake and stepped forward to shove Starscream back. Starscream’s optics flared and he returned the shove, knocking Magnus into the body, and as the smaller mech’s head skidded to the side, a tiny object came rolling out of the warrior’s left hand, the one that had been cradling the other’s head, and went rattling over the floor.

Moonracer sprang to snatch it up and said in excitement, “It’s a memnosphere!” Optimus caught his breath as she powered up the device: it came alight in her hands and started broadcasting a memory pattern—but one that was flickering and incoherent, degraded by eons: impossible to understand.

Optimus could have wept: a final scrap of hope being stripped away, and then beside him, Megatron stepped forward and took it out of her hand. “Vortex,” he said, and tossed the sphere

over to him. “Apply some creativity to the problem.”

“I’m not an engineer,” Vortex said in protest, catching it automatically.

“It’s a memnosphere, you idiot,” Megatron said. “Pretend it’s a living mech you’re trying to extract data from.”

“Mm,” Vortex muttered over it, thoughtfully, and then he looked over at the dead warrior. “Well... we could assume he recorded it himself, presumably towards the end. His internal memory would have a secondary copy. I could try and integrate the two...run it through a translation matrix...” He popped out a cranial infiltrator, the cruel thin line of it gleaming in the lingering flare, and took a step towards the bodies.

Ultra Magnus got in the way. “He was the last of the ancient Primes! He deserves to be treated with respect, not like some sort of data receptacle—”

“Oh, *please*,” Starscream said, folding his arms. “He’s just another corpse that no one bothered to smelt down because it wasn’t convenient.”

Ultra Magnus wheeled on him, and there was a gleam of satisfaction in Starscream’s optics as he dropped back, bringing up his combat systems. “Magnus!” Optimus said, urgently, and halted him. “Esperan Prime did not come down here to entomb himself. He came for a *purpose*. To protect Primus and our world. When he recorded this memnosphere, he must have wanted to provide information to those who found him. Please raise him up again, back into the position where we found him. And let Vortex help him achieve his goal.”

Ultra Magnus paused, and then he reluctantly bent down and straightened up the bodies, his big hands moving with gentleness. “Forgive me,” he said to the slumped warrior, low, and stepped back with his mouth an unhappy line as Vortex approached and fed the infiltration in through side of the mech’s helm.

“Ahhh,” Vortex murmured after a moment. “Much less neural shielding than nowadays, this is really quite trivial... yes. Yes, there it is...” and he reached down and put the sphere back into the big mech’s hand, and as he activated the sphere and stepped back, the image solidified, layering itself over the two bodies themselves, the flickering edges matching up to the lines of their armor. It seemed almost as if the ancient warrior actually lifted his head and came alive as the recording unfolded.

“I...am Ingentrix,” he said, voice crackly through the layers of patchwork and translation. “Protector of Cybertron. If I can still claim that title.” His face contorted in a spasm of agony, and he looked down at the body lying in his lap, that slight mech dead both in the present and the past. “Now that...my Prime is dead.”

Optimus traded a startled look with Ultra Magnus even as Ingentrix bent his head in a long moment of silence. “Esperan wouldn’t let me take him away from Cybertron, with the others fleeing,” he whispered finally. “Even after the Quintessons took Liaconia, and I told him there was no more hope of stopping the invasion...He insisted that we had to come here. That we had to protect Primus from them, and leave the Matrix in his keeping. For those who would come after us. As if anyone was going to.”

The ancient warrior raised his head again. “If anyone ever watches this—then I suppose he was right after all. I’d like to believe it will happen, but I don’t. I’ve seen mechs I fought beside for ten thousand years fighting to kill their own brothers, turning on civilians...I don’t see any hope of liberation. And even if it ever happens...what chance is there that anyone will ever find their way

down here? Only a fool's chance." His face twisted again, and he bent once more, stroking one huge thumb, caressingly, over the dulled cheek in his lap. "But that's what Primes are for, isn't it. To lead us towards hope. Even when it's the way only a fool would go."

Oil and lubricant were visibly trickling from his wounds in the recording, retracing the dark dried-up lines left on his corpse: his self-repair systems had been overstrained and couldn't keep up with the damage. But Ingentrix wasn't making any effort to intervene manually. "He wasn't even one of the formal candidates," he said, his voice crackling, still staring down at Esperan. "He only attended the choosing as a data clerk, to record the results for the archives. No one knew what to make of it when Primus gave him the Matrix, what he'd do... I knew I was meant to be Protector, but I didn't expect him to choose me. He'd never even seen a warmech before. On the way down, he kept flinching every time one of us got too close. We thought it was funny. I was sure that I terrified him... Afterwards, I asked him once if I'd been wrong. He said I hadn't. But he didn't think Primus meant for him to make choices out of fear."

Optimus found lubricant welling in his own optics. He put a hand on his chest, the warmth of the Matrix there, its steady pulsing beat. The words resonated in him, articulating something he'd felt instinctively.

"So I brought him here," Ingentrix continued. "As he asked me to. And now...he is dead. There were so many of them. I could protect Primus, or I could protect him. I couldn't do both. And he asked me..."

He shuddered through a noisy, rattling ventilation cycle that left him sagging even worse. It was a long moment before he raised his head again. His optics were glazing, beginning to flicker: death was coming. "If you're here, if you do come: he got most of the archives into subspace, where the Quintessons couldn't reach them. The anchor point is the glyph for *hope*, in the seventh line." He gestured towards the wall with his other hand, the ghostly shape of it moving away from the dead one in his lap that held the bare hilt of a laser sword, deactivated. Moonracer dashed over to it at once, crouching and skimming her fingers over the wall. "I found it!" she said.

"Here is the encryption sigil," Ingentrix said, as if in answer. Optimus leaned forward—they all did, instinctively eager, even Starscream: the six-dimensional code appeared in crisp strong sigils, this one data element obviously recorded with multiple backups and checksums to ensure its preservation.

Ingentrix waited a long moment after transmitting it, leaving them all time to record it themselves, and then he sighed out deeply and settled back. "That's the job done, then," he said, low, more to the mech in his arms than to them. Then he raised his head once more.

"I imagine if you're the next Prime, you'd also like some advice. Words of wisdom from the ancient past," he went on, raspily. "Some guidance onto the right path, hope for the future? Well, my Prime went and got himself killed, so you're out of luck." He sounded mocking and harsh as he said it, but his mouth worked, trembling. "I have nothing for you. But—" The projection fuzzed briefly as Ingentrix raised the empty hilt of his sword again, holding it right up to the memnosphere, his sudden intensity vivid despite the clouds fogging in from the edges of his optics. "But if you're here for *this*—if you're *my* successor—then I do have something for you."

He coughed heavily, wet, and had to wipe a glistening trail of lubricant from his mouth with the back of his hand, trembling. "Not advice. No lessons. I failed. I failed Cybertron, and I failed my Prime. If you're here, you haven't yet. For you, I have only—a charge. *Avenge us*." The words came out grating. "Swear to me that you will not rest until all of them are *dead*." There was a profound, vicious savagery in his voice, a rage palpable across eons, and Optimus flinched back

from it. “I don’t care if you’ve already chased them from our world. It’s not enough. Twice before we threw them back. Twice we lay down our arms. *They came back*. Swear to me—that you will not let them do it again. Swear that you will not stop, never stop, until every last Quintesson has been eradicated from the universe. *Kill them all*. And if you won’t—if you will not take that oath—then don’t you *dare* take up my sword. I don’t care if Primus himself closes your hand around the hilt. I curse you with my final breath.”

It was true: his voice had shattered into a rasping, dying whisper, audible only because all of them were silent, their vents closed, their turbines stilled. “Avenge my Prime. Avenge our world. *Avenge*—” Ingentrix breathed out one last rattle, his head drooping forward, and then he put his hand on Esperan Prime’s head. The full recording went crackled and blurry as the gesture blocked the memnosphere’s recorders, and then it stopped entirely.

Optimus let his pent-up exhaust out only slowly, shaky. He felt battered by the ancient agony, made so real and present. His circuits were humming with the horror of it, the terrible hopelessness behind those two dusty corpses. He’d seen them as heroic figures, before, and so they had been. But they’d also come here to their own certain death, out of the wreck of their entire world and the enslavement of their people, to lay down a faintest thread of hope without any assurance that anyone would ever pick it up. Around him the others all seemed as overwhelmed as he was. The light of the flare was dying out overhead, darkness closing in around them, but the faces around him were still just barely visible: Moonracer’s cheeks streaked with dripping lubricant, Firestar’s arm around her shoulders, and Elita’s face bleak and hollow. Vortex had drawn far back into the shadows, as if trying to put physical distance between himself and the dead; even Starscream looked shaken. Magnus had two bright reflective lines of lubricant shining on his face, his mouth rigid and downturned.

And then Megatron stepped forward. Optimus turned his head, still blank, and watched him. Megatron didn’t look dazed or overwhelmed at all. He knelt down before the two bodies, then reached out and pried loose the hilt still clutched tight in Ingentrix’s hand. He held it up between him and the dead mech’s face, a cold wrath in his face making him a mirror of the recording, from the other side of history. “*I swear*,” he said, his voice harsh and echoing in the darkness around them.

He stood up again and turned around to survey them all, his face utterly implacable, a threat written there clearly: *don’t get in my way*. His ice-cold ruthlessness bright and visible, that essential aspect that Optimus found so utterly incomprehensible, so horrifying. Just like the savagery of that final plea: *kill them all*, a dying request—that surely no *Prime* would ever have made. Ingentrix, too, had been terrifying and incomprehensible to that fragile civilian mech lying in his arms, big enough to literally break him in half.

I didn’t expect him to choose me, Ingentrix had said. But little Esperan Prime had done so anyway. Choosing hope instead of fear, at the beginning and at the end. And because of that—so had Ingentrix, when it had mattered. He had followed Esperan Prime down here in the end, chasing an impossible hope he hadn’t believed in himself. *He asked me to*. Like Megatron aiming his cannon at the ceiling, threatening to bring the whole layer down on their heads, bringing everyone here. Not because he thought it made any sense himself—but because Optimus had *asked* him.

Optimus looked at the bare hilt in Megatron’s hand. Deep in his chest, the Matrix was stirring with a strange tugging almost like the pull of a magnetic field, a sense of—the potential for completion, two poles wanting to come together. Primus was asleep, perhaps dead, and Ingentrix had not offered him any advice. But there was an answer here anyway, an answer Optimus had been groping towards in confusion from the moment when Megatron had spared him and the other Autobots: to *love* instead of to fight the Decepticons. And this was the final piece of that answer: to

love *Megatron*, despite his violence, despite his terrifying ruthlessness—a love that would bridge the gulf between the two halves of their kind. A love that he had to *choose*, deliberately. And that Megatron had to choose to accept. To lead the way for all the others.

Optimus drew a deep breath, and stepped forward to face Megatron. The tugging from the Matrix intensified, and Megatron dropped a quick frowning glance to the hilt in his hand, as if he felt it too. He straightened as Optimus stepped in closer, but he didn't back away, or pull up his combat systems. Optimus raised his hands and put them tentatively on Megatron's shoulders, then slid them slowly over his armor, letting them move instinctively, until one hand settled on Megatron's chest in the center, and the other came to rest on Megatron's right wrist, above the hand holding the empty hilt.

The Matrix was almost vibrating inside Optimus's chest. Megatron's optics were glowing, and he'd gone utterly still, tense and waiting. There was a final moment, a final instant before the choice—Optimus shut off his optics for a moment, then lowered his faceplate and leaned in. Megatron hesitated for a single moment of his own, and then he bent his head and closed the distance and kissed him, almost fiercely. At the touch of polymetal-on-polymetal, Optimus almost fell, the shock of connection reverberating through his entire body. But as he shuddered, Megatron's arm came around him, holding him up, maintaining the contact. The Matrix was surging fully online, *awakening*. Optimus had almost never tried to draw directly on its power; he knew the potential was there, but somehow it had always felt wrong in his body, too much and too intense, with a frightening potential for destruction. But now it came pouring with a crashing joyous rush—not into his own systems, but *through* him and onward into—

Megatron gasped against his mouth, and in his other hand, the empty hilt roared up all at once with a crackling violet flame, the power of it radiating supernova-hot against Optimus's armor.

And as it ignited, consuming nearly all that torrent of power, the remainder came back into Optimus, narrower and focused, and as it ran back into the Matrix, the circle closing, a host of voices came suddenly crisp and clear and audible in Optimus's head, as if he'd suddenly tuned in to the right frequency for a channel he'd been trying to pick up for untold millennia: a wave of warmth and love flowing out, voices speaking in welcome, in joy, saying, *Hail, Prime and Protector*, speaking now, at last, to them both.

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“Are you sure?” Optimus asked low, one final time, but he already knew the answer, even before Elita nodded.

“We'll be all right, Optimus,” she said steadily. “We managed to survive on Cybertron through the famine, with Shockwave hunting us with everything he had. We'll manage now that he'll only be *faking* it.”

He nodded, even though they both knew that the danger was by no means so trivial to dismiss. The sabotage campaign had to look plausible enough to convince the Quintessons that the war was still on the verge of starting back up again. That meant that almost no one outside high command would be told that Elita and her crew *weren't* really saboteurs. Meanwhile Shockwave was still getting warriors out of stasis as fast as he could fuel them up. Nearly ten thousand Decepticon warriors had been revived in the last tenday alone, and none of them would know about the secret plan. It would only take one over-excited lieutenant...

Optimus lowered his head, and Elita briefly reached up a hand and laid it on his cheek, a gesture of comfort. He covered it with his own. After she'd gone, he went outside and stood on the central balcony looking out over Polyhex: he didn't see her and her squadron, of course, but the morning

rush of mechs they'd be hiding among was flowing out from the city into the working perimeter, and it felt like watching her go in spirit, vanishing out towards the horizon where the ragged edge of the ruins had been pushed still further out.

He was letting her go in more than one sense. When he'd spoken to Elita in the ruins, what already seemed a lifetime ago, Optimus hadn't yet consciously recognized the choice before him, but he'd made the choice all the same. He'd chosen Megatron—as the only way to keep chasing the faint fragile hope of shared peace. Elita had recognized the choice herself. She'd been right to ask for her harmonizer back. And now Optimus would never again know the touch of her spark, the deep warmth and gentleness that underlaid her strength.

He already missed her deeply—and yet it was a loss he could grieve, but not regret. He couldn't want her harmonizer back. What he wanted, almost ravenously, was—*Megatron*, who had said *yes* to him in that tunnel, so improbably that Optimus still sometimes had to replay the memory data just to convince himself it had really happened, after all these eons of war.

“Has she left?” Megatron said behind him, coming out onto the balcony. His approach wasn't a surprise: even without the sword activated, he now had a faint violet corona surrounding him, a crackling hum of electromagnetic force like the harbinger of some terrible storm. He hadn't been short on presence or power before, but now it was almost overwhelming. He was being forced to rein his own temper in—to his enormous frustration—because when he yelled at anyone, they mostly just fell over stunned and needed energon and a day of quiet rest before they could get anything done. Of course, he rarely had cause to yell at any Decepticons anymore: they all kept gazing at him with variations on starry-eyed wonder and smug satisfaction, obviously delighted on some deep instinctive level to have a Protector again. Even Starscream had mostly quit chafing at the reins. It was a tossup which reaction irritated Megatron more.

Of course, there was a third category of response. As he neared, the aurora came lapping over Optimus's armor, and he sighed involuntarily in pleasure and leaned back into it. Megatron half grudgingly put an arm around him. Their factory-fresh tentative cooperation had been difficult enough; suddenly being shoved all the way into this profound new intimacy was still wildly disorienting. And yet it was irresistible, on multiple levels. The Matrix *sang* when Megatron came near him, radiating welcome and joy, eager for the completion of the circuit that ran through the Protector's blade. Optimus couldn't help but feel it: it was using his hardware to express the emotions. And clearly Megatron couldn't help but respond, albeit with grumpy reluctance.

“Yes,” Optimus said, only barely resisting the urge to turn and snuggle in closer. “They're heading for the Vos underlayers.”

“Good,” Megatron said, with a hard, satisfied note that puzzled Optimus. He glanced over, inquiring, but Megatron rubbed his thumb lightly up and down a sensitive stretch of Optimus's armor, the live edge along the top ridge of his lower arm section, and the bright curl of heat climbed straight into his motivator. Optimus turned the rest of the way towards him without even consciously meaning to, and as Megatron kissed him ferociously, the oceanic crash of desire swept away the question along with all thought. It didn't surface again for nearly eleven astrominutes, until they were flat on the floor heaving in fresh intake cycles.

“I don't like to share,” Megatron said, hoarsely, a belated answer.

Optimus turned his head and stared at him, and it seemed suddenly very funny: “You don't say,” he said, strangled, and then burst helplessly into laughter. Megatron propped himself up on one elbow and glared down at him. Optimus laughed again, his whole body still aglow with satisfaction and now amusement, and Megatron abruptly kissed him again, and Optimus put his

arms around him still chuckling softly even as Megatron plugged back into him and started determinedly charging up his pleasure circuitry again. “Is *this* funny?” he growled.

“It *is*,” Optimus said, smiling up at him, asking Megatron to join him in the joke, and Megatron glared down at him and then his mouth twitched, helplessly, and he looked away but wasn’t able to completely stifle a snort of laughter, and then he just shook his head and looked back down at Optimus with something between exasperation and wonder. “All these years, this entire war, I’ve never known what to do with you, and now I *still* don’t,” he said, dragged to honesty as a painful last resort.

Optimus laughed some more, a little breathlessly. “Love me,” he said, and reached up to draw his head down.

End

End Notes

With so many thanks to Monica woe for beta <3 and to rayguntomyhead for the inspiring prompt!

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